

The Tales of Dawood Khan

Who would have thought that Dawood Khan, the army contractor, would one day spill over with tales like these? What a superior rogue sparkling with incidents that the colonels and majors and other respectability concerned would rather forget! Here, memorably, are ten of his tales, complete and unexpurgated.

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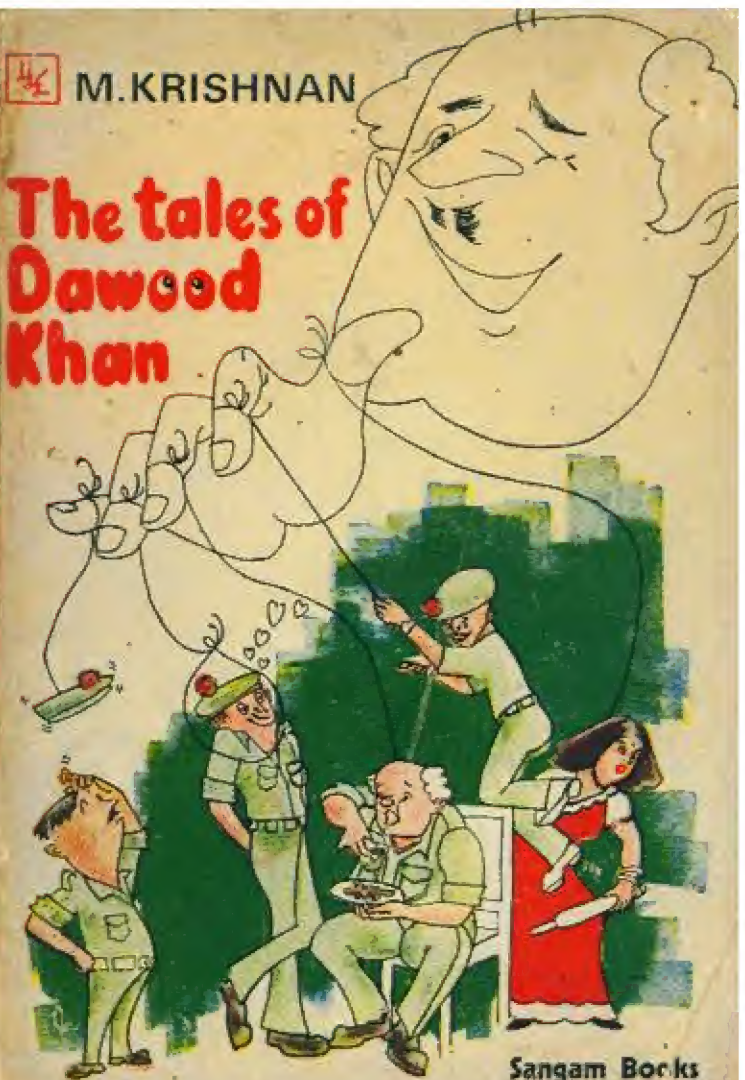
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M. KRISHNAN

The tales of Dawood Khan



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Dawood Khan**
and other stories

M. Krishnan

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The Tales of Dawood Khan

The Inexperience of Dawood Khan

The only excuse I can think of now, said Dawood Khan, is that I was young and inexperienced then, having just succeeded to my father's established business with the Indian Army. Perhaps, like many of my dear friends, you think that it was at Kirkee and Poona and Bangalore that I made my pile as an army contractor, and that is largely true, but it was at the old Cantonment at Bellary that my father taught me the intricacies of army contracts, and when he died I already had eight years of experience of that taxing business. But I was only thirty then, and an impetuous thirty at that, and one day, when the big hats at the Cantonment had been specially infuriating, I conceived the idea of getting my own back.

Every year, about mid-April, we army contractors treated the senior officers and their wives to a party—a gala dinner at which, though precedence was strictly observed, a certain informality was permitted. That April I had two of my schoolhood friends visiting me, and I managed to persuade them to stay on for the event.

You see nothing funny in that? Naturally not, my friend, for you do not know those men, though you may have heard of them. One of them was Premdilani, the Hindi poet, noted for his tender lyrics and extravagant diction, and his habit of falling in love on the slightest provocation; he was a handsome man, too, in the way some women like, though I myself thought his looks affected and even unmanly. And the other was Mustapha, the all-in wrestler, then in his prime. Two men so utterly different it was impossible to imagine—the poet was slight, fair, with long wavy hair that floated around his head like a scented halo, and had a look of deep melancholy in his cavernous eyes; Mustapha was a regular bear of a man, as burly and black and hairy, weighed over twenty stone, had no conversation beyond grunts, and was utterly innocent of the social graces.

Well, my plan was to seat the poet next to Brigadier Sunda's better half at the dinner, and the all-in wrestler next to Mrs Roy. Mrs Sunda was notoriously the most prudish, apprehensive and touchy woman in the Indian Army—she had almost had a general court-martialled for paying her a courteous compliment. And though Mrs Roy was past the first flush of her youth, she was still an uncommonly attractive woman, fastidious and highly accomplished and noted for her sharp criticism of the least social failing.

You see, I was young and inexperienced and did not know the idiocy of dividing humanity into watertight compartments. Premdilani was atrociously flagrant in his attentions to Mrs Sunda. He told her that her eyes were dark and mysterious, like twin pools in the night, and went on to describe her figure in the most classical terms—and would you believe it, the woman just sat there, lapping it up! But what really staggered me was the way Mrs Roy reacted to the wrestler. She pestered

him with questions and compliments throughout the meal, and asked permission to feel his biceps, and, Mustapha's sole response was to concentrate ferociously on his plate (he had just been sternly instructed in his table manners) and mutter from time to time, in a low growl, 'Astagfarullah! Astagfarullah!'—but luckily Mrs Roy did not hear him or understand him.

Mustapha disappeared after the meal (afterwards I discovered that he had taken the night train to Bangalore), and Mrs Roy plagued me with questions about him, and later insisted on my somehow getting the wrestler back to Bellary. In fact, my friend, things became so bad that I was forced to leave Bellary (you should know that her husband was the O.C.) and shift my business to Kirkee, Poona and Bangalore, which was, perhaps, just as well.

The Language of the Eyes

There is a language all of us learn in our youth, said Dawood Khan, that has no alphabet or grammar, something we learn spontaneously when the urgent and romantic impulses of manhood first quicken our pulse. You and I, my friend, may think it a mere silliness, but let us not forget that we think so because the blood is now slow in our veins, and that in our youth and prime we too furtively read the language of the eyes, and were excited by its lyrics. Yes, I am willing to look back upon it all charitably, even indulgently, but still it is difficult to find any excuse for Brigadier Bhalla.

He was not yet a Brigadier then, a very fine sportsman and a first-class officer, boyish-looking in spite of his 35 years. His career at the Military Academy had been brilliant, and he was equally meticulous in attention to fundamentals and to detail, both in his work and in the games-field.

He used to come to me for the linseed-oil that he needed in such quantities for his cricket bats and hockey sticks and polo ponies—you will recall that he was possibly the finest polo player the Army ever produced, and you might have heard of his remarkable record as an opening batsman, and as the centre-half of the Army hockey team. He used to insist on the finest linseed-oil obtainable and was willing to pay for quality, a thing he could afford to do, being so high up in rank and still a bachelor.

With his extraordinary powers of application and

attention to detail, he would undoubtedly have become a pundit in the language of the eyes, had it only had a difficult syntax and grammar, but unfortunately, since it did not, he failed hopelessly to understand it.

For a long time that made no difference to his life, for he was far too preoccupied with his batting average and polo ponies, when not preoccupied with work or being dressed just right, to have any time for anything else, though the parents of girls of marriageable age in military circles all over India, and many of the girls themselves, made determined efforts to secure him.

Then, in Kirkee of all places, having less work than usual and with the cricket season over, he began to take a belated and sudden interest in the language of the eyes. And the tragedy of it was not that he could not read it at all, but that he misread it fluently.

The first incident occurred at a fete, when he made abrupt and ardent advances to the intellectual niece of Major Money, and got slapped in the face. This ill-featured little vixen was given to looking down her long nose at all sportsmen, and she was looking down her nose at Bhalla with undisguised contempt, when he mistook the look for one of sudden passion, and being basically chivalrous, lured her to the balcony and attempted to kiss her, with such unfortunate results.

I can tell you that the entire Cantonment felt outraged that this girl should have made the fuss she did, and that everyone's sympathy was with Bhalla, but he took it badly and moped, and even his hockey was affected by the incident. Luckily, Major Money was transferred to Madras, and his snooty niece had to go with him, and after that Bhalla's game improved visibly.

But when, misreading the vacant gaze of Colonel Daphtary's wife (a good lady, but much given to vacant gazing) he climbed the drain-pipe at midnight to her bedroom window and offered her a bouquet of roses and his heart, something had to be done about it and done at once, for being sensitive, the Colonel's wife had a bad nervous breakdown. They transferred Bhalla peremptorily to Bangalore.

And it was in Bangalore, and after becoming a Brigadier, that he attempted to persuade the wife of a Sepoy, a woman of mature years with a bad squint, to elope with him. In despair they posted him to Poona, where he met with the tragic accident on the polo field that incapacitated him, and ultimately led to his joining the staff of the Military Academy. Thereafter he took enthusiastically to beetles and, abruptly as he developed it, lost all interest in the language of the eyes; but I have always thought, my friend, that if only it had some tangible structure and system Bhalla would have mastered it.

The Many-Splendoured Thing

Love, remarked Dawood Khan wistfully and somewhat unoriginally, is a many-splendoured thing. It can move men to strange things, and women too, to acts of rare courage and folly, remarkable escapades and surprising decisions. But what love needs to develop its dramatic potential is a suitable setting, an atmosphere where romance has a chance, and nowadays you seldom find it. That is why all great love-stories belong to the past, but you need not go back centuries to some forgotten age to find such an atmosphere—the old camps and cantonments of the Indian Army had it.

He sighed deeply and regretfully. Just think of it, he said, the richness and the colour of the life that I myself have known in my time as a military contractor, now gone for ever! Kirkee, Ambala, Poona, Aurangabad, Bellary, Mhow, Damarakotta—what a pageant of vivid recollections they bring back to me! What, you have never heard of Damarakotta! That only proves what I have been saying, how quickly and completely the past is forgotten. Why, Damarakotta, on the banks of the Kistna, was the most important military station of them all. They had an Officers' Training School attached to the cantonment, and the top brass of the Indian Army could often be seen in the bush country around, shooting quail and partridge, or galloping madly after pig with a hog-spear.

In fact, it was in Damarakotta that what I am telling you about happened, close on forty years ago. And I do not think it could have happened anywhere else, for

the atmosphere would have been less congenial in lesser military stations.

But first I must tell you a curious circumstance about the top society of Damarakotta, that though there were quite a few highly eligible bachelors and widowers among the officers, young and less young, they were all utterly devoted to the manly pursuits they followed, and had no time for anything but the barest politeness towards the sisters and sisters-in-law of other officers at balls and parties.

There was Captain Kottappuli from the far South, dark as the night and incredibly robust and muscular, a man whom any unattached female in the cantonment and even some of those already attached would have been proud to own, but he was dedicated to his Indian clubs and spent all his spare time practising hard to putt the shot a few inches farther. There was Major Malhotra from the Punjab, who possessed the most magnificent moustaches in the station, and whose passion was polo and pig-sticking, and there was Major Potdukhe from Maharashtra, unmatched in his skill at these very sports, wiry and with sinews of steel but unfortunately given to recurrent attacks of severe stomach-ache.

Colonel Cumbly came from the Karnatak, a man close on fifty who had survived three wives—he was rather jolly and stout, but reputed to be the richest man in the Indian Army. And Brigadier Bhola, who was still in his middle forties, was unquestionably one of the handsomest men I have ever seen, six-foot tall and straight as a lance, and with classical features set in the expression of faint melancholy that is so appealing to many women—it was rumoured that he had never got over having shot his wife accidentally twenty years ago in the course of a tiger hunt, a circumstance that added considerably

to his romantic appeal. Unfortunately, when not pre-occupied with his many official duties, he was never to be seen, being lost in one of the two interests that sustained his faintly sad life, hunting tigers on foot in the outlying jungles, or closetted in his den, writing faultlessly rhythmic lyrics in high-flown Hindi.

It was my belief then, and still is, that all these gallant officers would not have remained unattached and so exclusively wedded to their interests, had there been the right types to appeal to them among the ladies of the cantonment. But unfortunately, though highly educated and accomplished in a variety of arts, and even pretty in a rather petite and pinched sort of way, none of these good ladies had that rude exuberance of youth and good health that is so irresistible to strong, open-air men.

Mind you, I know what I am talking about, I knew these fine men almost intimately, and enjoyed their confidence, for in those days the responsibilities of army contractors were not merely limited to their contractual obligations. We had to rise to the occasion when any officer was involved in a temporary financial crisis and who, excepting Colonel Cumbly, was not frequently so involved? Of course, we had the sense never to presume on this private and almost fiduciary relationship, for there were always others willing to be more discreet and respectful. In the Indian Army of those days no officer ever failed to repay debts of honour—and the rate of interest was never lower than twelve per cent.

Naturally, we never hesitated to accommodate any officer who came to us. Only one of us, a comparatively raw and young man called Moodaliyar, had doubts in the matter and kept aloof from the officers. I knew this Moodaliyar well, and used to give him many little tips on how to run his business. He was a good man, but

inexperienced and limited to the most restricted horizons imaginable. He often came to me for advice, and naturally he trusted me absolutely—I used to borrow from him at six per cent and then be a friend in need to the officers, and somehow he felt that his money was safer that way, though ultimately it went to the very men he was so mistrustful of.

Why am I bringing in this Moodaliyar and telling you all this? Have patience, my friend, have patience! Moodaliyar, I can assure you, is quite vital to this strange tale of passionate and many-splendoured love. For if he had not been there with us, his wife's younger sister would not have come to Damarakotta all the way from remote Manjakuppam in the Tamil country, when his widowed mother-in-law died suddenly.

Naturally he could not suggest that a young, unmarried girl should stay on at Manjakuppam with her second cousins, and so Manjula came to live with her sister and brother-in-law, in their trim little house outside the Parade Grounds. And being that sort of a man, Moodaliyar dispensed with his maidservant as soon as she arrived, for he felt that his sister-in-law could fetch water, sweep and tidy the house, and help in the kitchen much better than one whose interest in the household was purely mercenary.

There is an undefined something about young women carrying gleaming pots of water, that has appealed powerfully to all men in our country through the ages. Poets have sung of the girl at the well, and artists have painted her, and though there was no well near Moodaliyar's house, there was a tap just outside it, from which his domestic water-supply was drawn. Every morning and evening Manjula could be seen at this tap, filling a large,

brightly-scoured brass pot with the water, and carrying it from the tap to the house and back.

I can assure you that Manjula was no raging beauty, and that her accomplishments were domestic in the extreme. She dressed dowdily in the style of her native Manjakuppam, and never sported even a silk sari borrowed from her sister nor any ornaments, but then youth and bursting good health need no ornaments, and she had both in plenty.

Almost overnight, the entire eligible manhood of the Officers' Mess had fallen headlong for Manjula. Every morning and evening, Captain Kottappuli could be seen at the gym, just across the corner, in his vest and shorts and with his magnificent muscular development displayed, swinging his Indian clubs with astonishing dexterity and energy. And on the maidan, to the other side, Majors Malhotra and Potdukhe could be observed galloping past on their splendid steeds, as they practised tent-pegging with inimitable grace and precision. Colonel Cumbly somehow found frequent occasions to saunter past the tap, smoking an imported eight-inch cigar (the only extravagance he permitted himself), and on the balcony of the Officers' Club could be seen the erect and handsome profile of Brigadier Bhola, gazing at the distance with a tender and ineffable sadness.

Such was the gentlemanly solicitude of these chivalrous men towards the object of their desire, that in spite of the intensity of their ardour they did nothing that could possibly offend the sensitive susceptibilities of a young and innocent girl—nor did they indulge in any practice that had the least suspicion of unfairness in their bid to outstrip one another in her possible affection. Once, it is true, Kottappuli gave up his usual exercise and took to putting the shot in a line almost parallel to the water-

tap, but he realised the enormity of his action almost at once, and returned to the gym to swing his clubs at an accelerated tempo. Once Potdukhe was stricken in mid-career with a sudden colic and had to dismount and lie down on the grass, but it must be said to the eternal credit of Malhotra that though he too dismounted and stood near the tap, watching his rival in silence, he refrained from twirling his superb moustachios. Cumbly, it was rumoured, blew a series of smoke rings directly towards the tap on one occasion, but this surprised none of us—we had always known the man was a bit of a bounder.

And how did Manjula react to all these gallant attentions, to this simultaneous laying of siege from so many different directions? I am sorry to tell you this, my friend, but the truth must be spoken. Perhaps it was because she was a simple, unaffected country girl, but her only response was to stiffen her limbs into an awkward attitude when she was too acutely conscious of things and, on a few occasions, to rush back to the house in a fit of uncontrollable giggling. No one had the faintest clue to her inclinations.

The only open declaration of intentions came, surprisingly, from the most unlikely quarters. One morning Moodaliyar came to me with a posh envelope, with nothing beyond the monogram 'B' on it, embossed in a sky-blue ink; inside it was a sheet of expensive cream-laid paper, with a faultlessly composed poem in Hindi inscribed carefully upon its surface in sky-blue ink. Moodaliyar told me the missive had been discovered on his doorstep early in the morning, and that since he did not know the language, he wanted me to translate it to him. And when I had done what he wanted me to, he was none the wiser for it.

I remember that verse still:

The broad, black stripes of the tiger
Strike terror into the hearts of men,
But they only serve as guide-lines
To direct my unfailing bullet.
But the delicate, thin stripes
on the blouse
Of one whom I watch from afar,
Filling her water-pot,
Have pierced my case-hardened heart!

Like all great love-stories, this too ended suddenly and in tragedy. One day we were all astonished, even shocked, to receive a gilt-edged card from Moodaliyar inviting us to a tea party to celebrate his second wedding—you will recall there were no laws to bar such things in those days, and he had married Manjula at a temple twenty miles away the previous evening!

Kottappuli died of a sudden heart attack three weeks later; the doctors said that over-indulgence in Indian clubs had strained even his stout heart, but we knew what had broken it. Malhotra asked to be seconded to a civilian post in the Punjab, and went away without even bothering to bid us good-bye, and Potdukhe had to retire abruptly and prematurely because his stomach condition turned chronic all at once. The Brigadier died, as you may remember reading, two months after the event, mauled by a tiger he had wounded and then followed recklessly into dense cover. Only Colonel Cumbly continued to thrive—but I have told you already what manner of a man he was!

Unforgettable Personage

If I were asked, said Dawood Khan, misquoting a title from a popular digest, to name the most unforgettable personage I have ever met, I would hesitate to answer. Naturally, in the course of a life-time spent in military camps and cantonments, one gets to know all sorts of people, extraordinarily colourful characters, some of them, and there were one or two that were outstanding even in that vivid crowd. But I hesitate between two of them.

If you had asked my friends, who had also known these panchromatic people, they would instantly have named Mrs Sethna, and I can't say that I shouldn't, myself. A most remarkable personage, Mrs Sethna, and one who commanded everyone's respect and admiration. Brigadiers quailed before her sparkling, black eyes, and colonels trembled at the sound of her hearty voice.

She was a Juno of a woman—or do I mean a Pallas Athene? She was tall, stately and magnificently made, a most commanding personage altogether, yes, a very considerable personage. And what made even senior army officers feel small and uncomfortable in her presence was the reserve of inexhaustible vitality behind her cheerful dignity, the vitality that was never expressed in a loud voice or an over-emphatic statement, but which was clearly visible behind the sparkle of her dark eyes, and the pleasant heartiness of her rather husky voice.

And what a brain she had! She knew every military rule, written or unwritten, inside out, she had authentic

genius for organisation and accounts, and was lightning swift in her efficient decisions. With a personality like that, they couldn't leave her out of army circles wherever she was, though she was only a Major's wife.

Many of us thought that she realised, in some sub-conscious way, the contrast that she presented to her husband, and that this was why, with the highest officers of the army at her beck and call, she never went anywhere without Major Sethna. He was a mouse of a man, and a faded little mouse at that. Looking at him, one was instantly sure that somehow he had managed to cheat at the entrance examination, and that he did not have the necessary minimum chest measurements and height. Even the khaki that he wore invariably was more khaki and drab than the khaki of other officers.

He rarely ever spoke, and when he did it was in a diffident, squeaking whisper, and on his face there was always a look of adoration for his larger-than-life wife, combined with a certain timid, patient resignation. And no wonder, for while Mrs Sethna was generally a most fairminded woman, and known for the impartiality of her views and comments, she could never agree with her husband, even in the smallest matter.

Really, this was the only failing, the only hint of smallness, that anyone could have found in her magnificent make-up, this inability to approve of what her husband said or wanted to do—he never went so far as to actually do anything after her veto. Mrs Sethna openly approved of other men's opinions and actions; once she patted a General on the back for coming out with a patriotic sentiment at an army fete, and her largesses of approval were as freely bestowed on Colonels and Commandants as her devastating criticisms of their conduct. In fact, I would be telling you only the bare

truth if I were to say that for twentyfive years Mrs Sethna dominated and influenced all the major decisions of military life and strategy in the cantonments she graced.

Why, then, do I hesitate to call this superb personage the most unforgettable I have ever met? Who else was there that I knew that could hold a candle to her? Well, my friend, my hesitation comes in this way. For years now I have been wondering if Major Sethna was not, after all, the guiding force behind his wife's firm rule of military roosts, if by the simple stratagem of suggesting to her the opposite of what he wanted said or done, he had not ruled those roosts in his own, quiet, mousy way.

The Sad Case of Chips

The trouble with men who like women, remarked Dawood Khan reflectively, is that they like them anyhow. Gallantry is a fine thing of course, especially in a military man, but it can be carried too far and become a mere compulsive habit, with no discrimination or taste to guide it. Take, for example, the case of Captain Chhipadohar, a case of the feeling developed to excess, if ever there was one.

Chips was noted, even as a slim Lieutenant, for his unpredictable and headlong susceptibility. Soon after he landed in Mhow, he fell madly in love with the Colonel's lady, a formidable woman fully three stones heavier and four inches taller than him, endowed with biceps and triceps, at the sight of whom even the Brigadier blenched. She was no end tickled by the dog-like devotion of young Chips, and invited him to her weekly tea parties, at which she found him very useful, as a sort of honorary bearer.

In fact, it was at one of these téas that the Captain met Miss Cama the Colonel's elder sister who was there on a visit, and succumbed instantly to her mature, asthmatic charms, with the inevitable result that he was transferred to Bellary.

Bellary in those days was a cantonment on the verge of being abandoned, with little gaiety or social life in it, and Chips could find hardly any feminine inspiration in the arid station. But there was a convent school not too far away, and he had a bicycle. He developed a

deep feeling for a twelve-year-old day-scholar with the most unfortunate consequences, the worst of which was that he had to appear before the Mother Superior, who upbraided him severely for an hour. After the inquisition, he went about looking dazed and depressed, an obviously broken man—he had an insoluble problem, an uncurbable affection for the Mother Superior. He was despatched at once to Bangalore, a move which, as anyone could have foretold, was most injudicious. Finally and in despair they seconded him to an appointment as an Instructor in a Technical Training Centre in a remote hill-station in the Deccan, where the trainees and personnel were both entirely male. Imagine the misery and frustration of an incurably ardent young man who had been denied his natural bent by such a mean stratagem! Till this posting, Chhipadohar had been content with a harmless, sentimental adoration, a burning inward feeling that had no outward or untoward expression except in a desire to be near, and perhaps to whisper a few words indistinctly. But now, driven by circumstances, he was impelled to positive, irrevocable steps.

At the foot of this hill in the Deccan there was a colony of gipsies who lived by selling firewood, collecting forest produce, goat-keeping and similar furtive pursuits, and the aging headman of the clan had a widowed daughter, a short, square matron of 40 who would soon ascend to her father's gaddi. The gallant Captain saw her from a distance, and fell instantly. Unlike the earlier objects of his desire, she was unattached and in need of a man, so that inescapably he resigned his Instructorship and married her. The last that was seen of the ill-starred Chhipadohar, he was on a precipitous slope of the hill, covered with boulders and thorn bushes, moodily herding seven recalcitrant goats.

All Mates are Dangerous

The Raja of Gund, said Dawood Khan, was short and rotund. But he was young, and full of the ebullient spirits and ambition found only in those that are both very short and very fat. Life in the cantonment was pretty dreary in those days, and we found a vicarious distraction in following the doings of the little prince on our borders, in sharing his triumphs and disappointments.

The Raja hunted, though there was hardly any game in Gund, and he played cricket, and had a music master who taught him to play the harmonium by the touch system, for the prince was tone-deaf. The day he shot a crocodile, he invited all of us to a great celebration, and a few days later his couriers visited the cantonment with magnificently gilt invitations to everybody who was anybody—the Raja was getting married.

Marriages in those days were arranged on the basis of personal benefit rather than personal suitability, and the daughter of the noble Sardar the Raja married, as we discovered when he brought his bride home, was a six-footer. She was also brought up in the most conventional traditions, which made matters worse. Whenever the Raja came near her, she stood up at once, towering high above him, and although during ceremonial processions he took care to give her a pony and mounted his big waler himself, her eyes looked clear over his resplendent *pagadi* at the crowd lining the streets, though her feet almost trailed the ground. She was a crack shot and musically accomplished, and though she had never

played cricket, in no time she had picked up the trick of getting the Raja clean bowled with a quick, underarm snorter—she was a natural athlete.

After a year of this miserable incompatibility, during which only his insuppressible ebullience kept him smiling, the real tragedy happened. The Raja fell madly in love with the eldest daughter of Subedar Kutty, a cheerful girl only 4-foot 6-inch high, but already showing promise of attaining an enviable girth.

He could have married her as a second spouse, of course, but such was his love for her that he could not bear the thought of giving her a merely secondary place in the social life of Gund. Divorce was hardly known in those days—and moreover, on what grounds could he seek to divorce his Rani, the lofty model of all wifely virtues? Somehow, anyhow, he had to get rid of her.

Finally, he decided to drown her. By guarded inquiry he had learnt she could not swim, and he himself was virtually unsinkable. You may already have guessed there was a broad river flowing through Gund, for it was there the royal crocodile had been shot, and one fine morning the Raja arranged a picnic on the river for his Rani and himself. When they were in midstream, he managed to capsize the little rubber boat, and struck out for the shore, but he had reckoned without his consort's extraordinary reach.

As she fell into the water, she reached out and grabbed his feet, and by the time he could break loose from her clutch, the dinghy had righted itself, and she deftly transferred her grip to it, climbed in, and was saved. The Raja was half-way to the shore, swimming strongly, when suddenly he floundered and seemed to be drawn

into the water, and was never seen again. The ignorant, superstitious folk of Gund have always maintained that it was the mate of the croc he shot that got him. Well, that only proves my point—all mates are dangerous.

The Case of Mrs Khanna

Who knows, exclaimed Dawood Khan, the mysterious susceptibilities of the human heart! In our ignorance and wonder we classify its lapses and give them impressive names—mitral stenosis, angina pectoris, ventricular hypertrophy—mere names, I tell you, to cover our ignorance. The heart is capable of less definable afflictions, profound in effect though often of a passing nature, and for these we have no names, or only weak and witless ones.

The case of Brigadier Khanna's wife will illustrate my point. A woman of exquisite refinement, the faultless proportions of her figure and face had just that touch of austerity that lent her an aloof, other-worldly beauty. Men turned to look again at her, but turned in worship rather than in covetous desire, for her eyes had that limpid tranquillity, her figure that delicate shortfall from fulness, that moved even army men to admiring reverence.

But then the Brigadier was transferred to Madras, and one day his wife, out of the sheer boredom of life at St. Thomas Mount, sampled a Madrasi prawn curry. The results were startling, to say the least, and every time she furtively indulged her passion for the curry (which soon became uncurbble) the results were invariably the same.

According to Colonel Tophkane, the learned physician of the Base Hospital who treated her, something she had ingested had occasioned a complex enzymatic chain reaction in her metabolism, resulting in a constriction of

the capillaries and an induced cardiac insufficiency, which in turn, manifested itself in a near-occult subcutaneous oedema, passing off in twentyfour hours approximately, and the cure prescribed by the pundit was, shockingly, a common purgative.

In other words, and words that you and I can understand, soon after partaking of the curry, Mrs Khanna's skin acquired an inviting, sensuous tenderness, and her body swelled slightly and uniformly till she was quite irresistibly voluptuous, and she stayed that way for a day—and a day is long enough, my friend, to move hundreds of hearts to violent passion.

After a series of highly regrettable incidents, they transferred the Khannas to Mhow, and from there, in rapid sequence, to Bellary, Kirkee and Poona, but it was useless. Prawns and the spices needed for the curry were obtainable everywhere, and Mrs Khanna had the recipe safely locked in her occasionally insufficient heart.

You see the peculiarity of the situation? Neither the Brigadier nor his wife ever did anything to which the Army Chiefs could take the slightest exception, but periodically a riot would break out where they were and the most unfortunate incidents happen, in which dashing young Captains, middle-aged Majors, and even senior Colonels well past the conventional age of folly, were involved. In despair they promoted Khanna prematurely and posted him to the charge of an army training centre, with disastrous consequences—the trainees at the centre were young.

Perhaps you have heard the end of this sad story, how, disgusted with human behaviour in India, the Khannas migrated to Canada with the active encouragement and

help of the top men of the Army: and how there they found peace at last. Something in Canadian prawns, or may be in the quality and authenticity of the Indian spices available in that country, finally solved their problem.

A Laggard in Love

All great stories of love, remarked Dawood Khan, are tragic, for what makes them great is the grand passion of lovers hopelessly doomed by circumstances. They are also tales of heroism, for with a little discretion, which they scorned, these great lovers could have saved themselves, but oddly enough the saddest true-story of love I know is about a man who was 'a laggard in love and a dastard in war', as Scott puts it, a Captain Pillai from Kerala whom I used to know long ago, in Mhow.

He was a grossly-built man, cautious, secretive and unremarkable in all ways, except that he was the photographic expert of the station. Actually, he was the Accountant at the Stores, a post to which he had been seconded for his unmanly prudence in the field, and his work naturally brought him into daily contact with Miss Heera, the typist.

She was dignified and quiet, and seldom spoke to anyone, and though on occasion she smiled an enigmatic, *Giaconda* smile, she had never been known to laugh. I would not call her a beauty, but her soft-spoken aloofness captivated Pillai. However, being the soul of caution, he never declared his love, for the thought of a gentle rebuke from Miss H was unbearable to him.

Then, one fine morning, Pillai received orders transferring him forthwith to Bangalore. He had barely a week in which to hand over and was kept frantically busy balancing columns—and he could think of no safe way of declaring his secret passion to Miss H before vanishing

from her life. Then, the day before he was due to leave, the C.O. who was a keen amateur photographer sent for him and asked him to load six cassettes of film from bulk stock urgently—and Pillai found his opportunity.

He explained his predicament to Miss H, and told her how he hated the thought of leaving the Stores and, er, friends there, and how his only chance was to load the film quickly and take it to the C.O. and request a cancellation of the transfer while the tyrant was still in an amicable mood—and for loading cassettes from bulk film, he lied unblushingly, he had to have help, for the work had to be done in total darkness. To his surprise and delight, she agreed to assist him.

Pillai's plan, once he had lured her into the darkroom and switched the lights off, was to make a tentative pass at her on the pretext of handing her the film. Perhaps she would scream, or slap him, or even turn on the light—he had to risk even that. Darkness, especially the inky, impenetrable blackness that prevails in a photographic darkroom, has different effects on different people. Most feel suffocated and unsure in it, but to a photographer it brings a sense of exhilaration. Pretending to pass her one end of the 35 mm bulk film, Pillai reached out for Miss H.

Whatever he had expected, it was not what happened. With unerring aim she threw herself into his arms, kissed him passionately, and burst into tears. Rendered reckless by this, and by the total darkness, Pillai proposed to her, at the same time declaring his intention to resigning from service and setting up a studio in the Cantonment, so as to continue to reside in Mhow, a move that Miss H warmly approved of.

Why prolong the agony? Within a week Pillai had

resigned, married, and discovered that his wife had long, uneven carious teeth, a strident voice and a domineering nature, which was why she had never opened her mouth or spoken aloud when she was a lowly typist. The last I heard of the unfortunate man, he was learning to cook, a natural extension of his expertise with time-temperature development.

The Wages of Sin

Perhaps it was that our knowledge of physiology was less complete then, and possibly that our manufacturing skill was more limited, said Dawood Khan, but personally I am convinced that it also had something to do with the food we ate. The soil was still unexhausted, and free of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and grain and the other produce of the earth had vitality, and were so much less tired and artificially forced. The wages of sin were birth.

And people, you remember, were much more narrow-minded about these things then. Today, I believe, no one ever uses the word sin to mean what it meant—they say extra-marital relationships, instead—they have become more bombastic! Anyway, it is a fact that prayer and what they now call post-conceptive measures were all that were available to sinners in those days. And naturally when the whisper spread that Mustafa Bey's pink pill was infallible, he became the most sought-after man in the Cantonment overnight.

Mind you, he had prepared the ground with forethought, even a measure of art. He did not set up his shop outside the barracks as a consulting expert, but as a vendor of curios. Half jokingly he would remark to the customers staring curiously at the wooden fish and brass toads in his shop, to the more likely of them, that he had an old Rajasthani cabinet of love-philtres and potions, the efficacy of which he could not guarantee.

Colonel Pomello's wife was the first to buy a green

philtre from him—her passion for a certain young subaltern was, unfortunately, unrequited. No one knows how she contrived to get its contents into his food, but soon after the meal he was violently sick and fell into a swoon. Then he applied to the Colonel for an immediate transfer to Mhow, on the grounds that some unknown person was trying to poison him, a ridiculous thing to say, but he said it so persistently that he got his transfer.

Mustafa said nothing to the more intimate of his customers who twitted him on the incident; he just shrugged his shoulders and smiled, as if to say, 'Well, I specifically said I could not vouch for it.' To one of them, however, he displayed a pink pill in sworn secrecy, a pill that he did guarantee, provided it was taken within twentyfour hours with a tumbler of goat's milk.

God only knows how news of such exceedingly private transactions spreads, but it does, more speedily than public announcements. Within a month the people at the nearby village found it necessary to add to their stock of goats.

Naturally, he told no one the secret of his pill. Had he survived to these days, I believe he would have parted with the formula for a large sum in the interests of the nation, for Mustafa was something of a patriot in his spare time. But unluckily he died suddenly one day, and the secret died with him.

People said he died of a sudden stroke, but as his friends knew, it was something much more tragic. You know how a man's brilliance in a single skill often covers his ignorance of many other things. Mustafa admitted freely that he knew nothing of the contents of the little flasks in his Rajasthani cabinet, but among those who

believed in his pill (and who did not?), the notion persisted that his philtres, too, were potent.

One day, more to please an untiring customer than anything else, he sold Colonel Pomello's wife a tiny vial of some ultramarine fluid from the cabinet—and the next morning he was dead. The good god only knows how she had contrived to get it mixed with his dinner, but she had.

The Yam from Wellington

What the ear does not hear the eye does not see, remarked Dawood Khan sententiously, and the heart does not grieve over. Take, for example, the case of Surajmul, Head Storekeeper of our old Regiment at Poona. Many of us knew of his wife's secret passion, but naturally no one told him about it, and in blissful ignorance he was happy.

O no, my friend, you misunderstand me—it was not that at all. In fact, Lajjavati was devotedly faithful to her husband and doted on him. But the Surajmuls, being Jains, were very particular about what they ate, and naturally she had to be most careful to hide her passion for khebabs and cutlets, and especially for mince-meat, from her loving spouse.

You see the delicacy of her position? Perhaps she knew that she could depend on people not to betray her to her husband, but still it was difficult for a woman, placed as she was, to satisfy her craving without grave risk of discovery.

Luckily for her, the quarters next door were occupied by Lance Naik Moodaliyar, and Mrs Moodaliyar was not only an expert at various Madrasi curries featuring mincemeat, but also a most understanding friend.

The trouble with life is that nothing deeply satisfying ever lasts for long, and when the Lance Naik received orders transferring him peremptorily to Kirkee, Lajjavati felt even more upset than her neighbours. However, it so happened that the conscientious Surajmul was then

frantically busy with the annual stock-checking at the Stores, and when he left early in the morning after announcing that he would not be able to come home for lunch, but would get himself something from the canteen, Mrs Moodaliyar offered to teach her friend the Madrasi ball-curry that she liked more than anything else.

Well, they had just finished making it at three o'clock, and were busy with the chappaties to go with it, when they heard Surajmul's dry, precise cough at the door and his sharp, precise tattoo on the wood of the door. We speak of men of action, but let me assure you, my friend, that women too can act. By the time Lajjavati had dawdled her way to the door, innocently asking 'Who is it?', and let her husband in, Mrs Moodaliyar had already removed the curry from the fire, and with a demure farewell she left by the back door, with the vessel of steaming curry held bravely in her bare hands. And within that brief interval she had found the time to put a generous portion of the curry into another vessel, and secrete it for her friend in a corner of the kitchen.

But it is quite impossible to hide the aroma of a properly made Madrasi ball-curry from even the most obtuse perceptions, and Surajmul, who had missed getting his lunch at the canteen in his preoccupation with stock-checking and was consequently ravenous, had a most sensitive nose. With exclamations of delight over his good fortune he piled four chappaties on to a platter, and then went unerringly to the corner of the kitchen where Lajjavati's share of the ball-curry was. And then he fell to, while his wife prayed desperately within herself.

Well, when his hunger was satisfied, he asked her what this delicious curry was, this curry so much more delicious than anything he had ever eaten, and Lajjavati told him

that it was a yam which Mrs Moodaliyar's brother had sent from Wellington, some kind of a wild yam that grew in the forests of the Nilgiris. Surajmul was all for rushing out to ask the Lance Naik before he left, to write to his brother-in-law to request despatches of the yam from time to time to the Stores at Poona, but Lajjavati, a resourceful woman, prevented this effectively by reminding him of the quarrel between Moodaliyar and his brother-in-law—she added with womanly cunning and much verisimilitude that it was because Mrs Moodaliyar did not want her husband to know about this gift from her brother that the yam had been cooked in the kitchen of the Surajmuls.

The Moodaliyars left for Kirkee early next morning, much to Lajjavati's combined sorrow and relief, but her husband could not forget the yam. Twice, on some pretext or other, he went on brief trips to Wellington, and once he returned with some outsize beets for which he had paid an exorbitant price, and once with a large yam that did have a taste and consistency vaguely reminiscent of meat, but in spite of his wife's using the very masala that she had learnt from Mrs Moodaliyar, the curry was never so good as that first time.

The Staff of Life

The ready-sliced bread on our side-plates had a musty staleness for all its fresh whiteness, and Dawood Khan held the newfangled technique of incorporating a preservative in the dough directly responsible for this. He argued, as he washed down the mustiness with cold, bitter coffee that tasted of burnt jaggery, that God never meant the staff of life to be made this way. In the old days you could tell when the bread had gone bad by looking at it, but now, thanks to this preservative, you could not see it though the horrible mildewed taste was there all right.

But of course, he conceded, as he took another sip of coffee, there was no such thing as good bread, for bread, like time, was relative. I am reminded of the time, he added, when the O.C. at Mhow decided we deserved better bread.

The entire cantonment was being supplied by two bakeries, and the Brigadier thought the lumpy stuff not good enough for his men. He made further inquiries, and learnt that though Novel Bakery and Crunchy Crust put conspicuously different tabs on their loaves and openly derided each other's products, they were both owned by the same man, and all their bread and biscuits were baked in the same oven.

The Brigadier sent for Aboobucker and warned him sternly that unless the quality of his bread was improved at once, he would have to close down his shops. Aboobucker, who was somewhat hot-headed for all his business

acumen, replied that his shops were in the civil lines, and this provoked the Brigadier to order that all supply of bread from the civil lines would cease forthwith, and that a bakery should be opened inside the barracks, in the immediate charge of Havildar Trimbak Singh, whose father had been one of the pioneer bakers of Mhow.

Well, that did for Aboobucker all right, and he went away to Bangalore, where a cousin of his had a bakery. But what shall I say of Trimbak's early adventures in bread-making! One day it was like chewing gum, and the next it was kiln-fired brick. After a while he settled down to a standard, sour, case-hardened loaf, burnt and wooden on the outside and unbaked and pasty within, which could be eaten only with the aid of boiling sweetened milk or a curry with plenty of highly-spiced gravy.

Finally an enterprising Captain somehow traced out Aboobucker's address in Bangalore, and wrote an impassioned epistle to him. The Brigadier was a proud man, but basically fairminded—he ceded Aboobucker's demand for subsidy in restarting his bakery. It was everyone's opinion that Aboobucker's new product, Novel Crust, was inferior to both his old brands, but how heavenly it was after a month of barracks-made bread!

Trimbak must have retired from the army long ago, and I wonder, said Dawood Khan as he gulped down the last of his coffee and grimaced, if he is now in charge of this mass-produced bread.

Other Stories

Dilemma

On Diwali Day when I received the neatly-wrapped parcel, I was reminded, irresistibly, of a former defeat. I didn't have to open the parcel to know who had sent it. Mr Ipe, of course. And naturally I put off opening it, for I did not want to know the probable value of the gift my new-found friend had bestowed upon me. It was bound to be something costly—and my coffers were empty. No wonder I was reminded of the losing battle I had fought with the Corporation.

My house is on a level lower than the houses of my neighbours, but years ago the floor was a clear six inches above road-level. Then the Corporation decided to macadamise our road and raise it half-a-foot; my response was to have my floor relaid with thick bricks, so that it was elevated by three inches and was still superior to the road. Then they went in for a concrete pavement, and while they were about it raised the road a further six inches. By a supreme effort, and by sacrificing a part of the bottom of my door, I had my floor raised

another three inches, so that the door frame was buried in the cement, and the floor was flush, in a fashionable, modern manner, with the road-surface. But three years ago, they resurfaced the road, adding a definite inch, and I have had to be content with a wet floor during the monsoons.

You may ask what all this has to do with Mr Ipe. Well, I concede that the connection is not obvious, but it is there, in my mind. It is just that I see, in my mind, history repeating itself. It is just that I see myself being forced to accept defeat once more and, being a proud man, I do not like the prospect.

Actually, Mr Ipe is not unlike a Corporation in some ways—and I do not merely mean, in a feeble sort of pun, that he himself is possessed of a considerable corporation. In his super-human size, in his inexhaustible resources, and more than all in his determination to go one better than I can, he distinctly resembles a Corporation. Moreover, though he told me that he was a Director of the Boards of several companies, he looks and behaves much more like three Mayors rolled into one.

I met him last month in a train, coming home from a disastrous photographic trip; we shared a compartment for the night. The splendour and newness of his suitcases and hold-all and other furnishings awed me, and his huge bulk filled me with envy, but the man himself was friendly, not condescendingly but genuinely friendly and in need of company.

He evinced the most lively curiosity in my paraphernalia and questioned me closely about my vocation, and in no time at all he had me telling him about my recent misfortunes. Finding a sympathetic listener at last, I could not resist telling him the sad story of my roll-film

holder. While attempting some wildlife photography from elephant-back, my roll-film holder had slipped and fallen to the ground, and had been trodden upon by my mount, whereafter it ceased to be a roll-film holder. What infuriated me was that everyone thought it a huge joke, and laughed uproariously over the incident—but Mr Ipe was full of understanding. He even insisted on viewing the remains, and clucked his tongue thrice over it.

When we parted in the morning he gave me his card and (since I had no card to give him) noted down my address in an opulent-looking pocket-book, covered in crocodile-skin, with his initials stamped on it in gold. And three days later he called on me, in an enormous limousine. After we had told each other how glad we were to meet again, and he had squeezed himself into my broadest chair, he dipped casually into his pocket and came out with what he called a little present he had brought me—a brand-new roll-film holder!

Of course it was of a different make from mine and much costlier, and would not fit my camera, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell him that. I felt tongue-tied and horribly embarrassed, but had the sense to accept the gift with loud exclamations of simulated joy. Next week I returned his call, and took six 15×12 enlargements of my best pictures with me—that had meant using up all my stock of paper hoarded with miserly care, but it was the least I could do.

Two days later Mr Ipe sent me through a special messenger, a crocodile-skin gadget-bag that must have set him back all of Rs. 150. I retaliated with mean deceit and even a measure of spite; I put in all the money I had on a specially-ordered imitation-crocodile belt, fully 42 inches long and a good three inches wide, with two pouch-pockets and swivels for clasp-knives.

He was delighted. He called on me the same evening, wearing the belt, and assured me it was quite the nicest present anyone had ever sent him. A shade tight, but he had an elastic insert put in already. He left behind him a box of super-deluxe cigars, in token of his gratitude.

And now he has sent me, along with his Diwali greetings, this engine-turned, solid-silver case, weighing about three-quarters of a pound, to hold thirty cigarettes. I don't know what made him imagine that a man like me could find any use for something so resplendent—on second thoughts, I see a very definite use for that case, but hope I will not be reduced to that stage. There are only two things I can do now—either insult him so boorishly and pointedly that our burgeoning friendship will wilt and wither and die on the spot, or accept defeat, pack my things, and leave for an unknown destination.

Dark Doubts on a River-Bank

Here I am, on the banks of the Karmanasa, the river that divides Bihar from Uttar Pradesh, complete with a change of clothes and a large, bright yellow turkish towel, and I cannot make up my mind. Should I bathe in the river, or not?

The D.F.O., who is my host and a learned man in his way, is inclined to go by his formidable knowledge of departmental rules and regulations. According to him, when there is no explicit elaboration of a rule or convention, it has to be construed strictly and literally. Therefore, the old, old belief that even to dip one's toes in the waters of this destructive river will automatically cancel out one's karma, can apply only to whatever credit or debit of good or evil I may have acquired in this life. Therefore, only the carryover of the balance of my actions to date, as they will affect my next *janma*, will be destroyed by a dip in the river. Unless I had bathed here in my last *janma* as well, the influence of my karma from that past will be carried over to the future.

I notice that he himself is not having a bath. He says it is too cold for a bath. It is rather cold, and both the R.O. and I believe him. The R.O. and I both feel that it just cannot be that he really thinks that he has acquired so much credit from beneficial actions in this life that he is unwilling to risk losing it. The R.O., too, is not bathing, but his reasons are different.

He argues that if something has the power to destroy so instantly and totally, it cannot only destroy a part of

a whole. He is quite willing to lose whatever beneficial influences he may have built up in past *janmas*—they can't amount to much, anyway, since he is only a R.O. and not the D.F.O. But having fasted every Friday for ten years and performed so many *pujas* at so many shrines. . . .

My own problem is exactly the opposite. I will not accept it openly, but in my heart of hearts I can recall several occasions when my actions were prompted, not by that sense of rectitude that a Brahman and a gentleman should go by, but by greed. That I gained nothing by these actions does not take away from their potential to affect my future adversely—it is one's intentions that count in such things, not one's inefficiency. Having expiated the malignant influences from my past by my life so far, hereafterwards only whatever beneficial influence remains can apply—first there is the penalty, then the reward. I do not have the dimmest recollection of having done good in my previous *janmas*, and I may have done nothing. But supposing I had?

Anyway, I think I will also follow my companions and refrain from a bath. It is too cold.

The Serpent in the Rose

Nowadays one never hears of attempted murder by cobra-garland. No doubt this is because the practice of greeting a distinguished and hated guest by placing a great garland of roses around his neck has fallen into disuse, with the cost of the flowers risen so steeply. The cobra, in the stories I heard years ago, was cunningly hidden among the opulent flowers, and held *in situ* by the man garlanding the guest; naturally, a garland thick enough and long enough to contain a six-foot cobra (it was always a six-foot cobra) inside the redolent cover of rose-petals would be frightfully expensive today, and perhaps also difficult to obtain. This, it seems to me, is the main reason for the discontinuance of this highly decorative mode of assassination. It could also be that its ineffectiveness had something to do with the mode becoming obsolete—in all the stories I have heard, invariably the victim escaped with nothing worse than a fright.

Yesterday, I asked a noted herpetologist if he had heard this story. Being a comparatively young man, I thought he might have missed hearing a circumstantial account of it, but he had heard it all right. Naturally, to prevent the cobra from squirming around and disclosing itself prematurely, the man carrying the garland would have to hold its head securely in one hand and its tail in the other, and when he let go of the garland the snake, irritated by having been held in this manner, would snap at his releasing fingers and probably get in a quick bite. I asked the expert if this did not seem the weakest part of the story, and he agreed that it was.

He also agreed with me that snakes could not be trained to attack a particular person, or even to attack people with certainty. All that can be done is to place a serpent in circumstances where it would be likely to attack a human intruder, and try and make the prospective victim intrude. I have always thought Conan Doyle's *The Speckled Band* a great story, but though its author chose his snake wisely (a Russell's viper, one of the most aggressive of venomous snakes, and largely nocturnal) the idea of letting it slither down a wall into the next room at the dead of night so that it would bite a sleeping girl seems far too optimistic and chancy a method of murder.

After discussing the question in detail with the expert, I realised with sadness that most of the thrilling stories I had read of murder by serpents were wildly improbable, and some quite impossible. In fact, the only likely method of combining snake poison and a rose garland to kill a man would be to provide a relieving sprinkling of rose-leaves in the garland and hide a twig with a thorn, tipped with some deadly snake-venom, at the join of the two ends of the garland, which would naturally be placed on the nape of the guest being honoured with the garland. A quick, downward depression of the thumb by the garlander would drive the poisoned thorn into the garlandee's neck, ensuring results. Of course with a recurved rose-thorn there is always the chance that the man putting the garland around the intended victim's neck would get the poisoned point in his thumb—but in any case results can be guaranteed.

Double Discomfiture

Until recently, when I met a Secretary to Government to explain a claim on behalf of a trust, I thought the mid-Victorian habit of decorating business places with mottoes was decently dead. But, seated at this Secretary's table, I knew at once that I had been premature in my hope. Perched on his blotter, in the middle of the table, was a motto in two-inch-high black type on a wooden stand; it stared me in the face and it said 'Be Brief'.

Straightaway I found myself indulging in an involved preamble. I had to explain a claim that was rather technical, a claim too tersely specified in a schedule to an agreement. The motto put me off almost as much as the Secretary's opening remarks, that he (no less) had looked into the papers and doubted very much if any claim lay, but would listen to me anyhow.

I thanked him effusively for agreeing to listen to me, like a man who knows at heart that he has no claim to argue, while he listened in owlish silence, smiling a sceptical smile and looking at his wrist watch from time to time. Then I pulled myself together and quoted the authority of the schedule.

'You refer to this skedool?' he asked, pointing to my copy of the agreement.

'Yes, yes,' I replied, 'Section 6 of this, er, shedul. It is quite specific on the point, though it could have been drafted more explicitly.'

'I have seen that,' said the Secretary. 'I suppose this skedool you have is the same as the skedool to my copy of the agreement.'

I didn't quite know if he meant that he (no less) had already looked into Section 6 and thought that no claim lay under it, or if he doubted the genuineness of my copy. His habit of saying 'skedool' irritated me; I knew of this American and alternative pronunciation, but I had always said 'shedul' and now I found it hard to resist saying 'skedool' in an affected drawl.

'Identically the same skedaddle—I mean shedul,' I assured him.

He turned to a tray at his side, looking for his copy of the agreement, a gesture that seemed to confirm the view that it was my bona fides he suspected, but I didn't mind this, for it gave me the opportunity I had been waiting for. As he fished in his tray, I reached over and swiftly and silently reversed the motto-stand, so that the advice to be brief now faced him. When he turned back to me he didn't seem to notice the change, but suddenly I felt too hustled and confused to do justice to my mission, and left abruptly, to his surprised relief, promising to send in my explanation in writing.

'By tomorrow—briefly and in writing,' I blabbed as I rose to leave. 'Thank you ever so much.'

For when I turned that wretched motto-stand around I was suddenly confronted with another motto pasted on its reverse, in even more prominent, red type.

'Get To The Point,' it counselled.

Interview with a Savant

I was cooking dinner when the man from the picture journal called. When I feel the culinary urge, I send my cook away, for I want no professional criticism of my methods, and don the *lungi* from Singapore that I keep specially for the occasion, a blood-red *lungi* with miniature dragons in raw sienna careering across its bloody redness—oil-stains and minor spills do not show up on it.

After making a start on my curry, I found there was no ginger for the final garnish, and sent out my neighbour's servant to get it, and naturally I thought it had arrived when this man walked right into my kitchen. 'Chop it fine,' I instructed him, waving a hand towards the chopping board, too preoccupied with my curry to look up from it.

'Excuse me. . . ' stuttered the man, and I looked up. There was an exquisitely dressed young man standing besides me; he had a blue leather satchel and a camera in his hands, and no ginger.

'Who the devil are you?' I asked, and he told me. He was doing a series for the journal on distinguished scientists, and being in Madras, he could naturally not afford to miss interviewing the famous Dr Krishnan.

Immediately I realised that beneath his dandified exterior he was really a fine young man. If I have wanted anything from life it is a doctorate, bestowed on me *honoris causa*, of course, but owing to the deplorable impercipient of our universities, have not had it.

The ginger arrived at this juncture, and I set the young man to chop it fine for me, being otherwise engaged. He cut his hand clumsily, but at last had the ginger chopped to my satisfaction, and I stirred it into the curry. I took a plate from the side-board, loaded it with a generous helping of the curry, a slice of bread and a tablespoon, and invited him to sample it.

He had considerable difficulty swallowing the first spoonful—evidently it was too hot. He tried to push the plate away unobtrusively, but I was vigilant. I advised him to eat it slowly, and assured him that it was excellent for the liver, containing as it did fenugreek, asafoetida, turmeric, camphor and ginger. As the interview proceeded, he tried another tentative spoonful, and then firmly dumped the plate in the sink. He thanked me hurriedly, and fled.

Later, while having dinner, I reproached myself. I should never have pressed my curry on this young man—it was intensely bitter, as if a large pinch of quinine sulphate had been put into it. Evidently what that fool of a servant of my neighbour had brought me had not been ginger, but some wild rhizome—or else the red ink I had added for a rich colour was a mistake. Anyway, his account of me, which he had assured me would be published the next week, could not be enthusiastic.

Only when I saw the journal, at a railway bookstall, did I realise what a blessing a name like mine is, in spite of its lack of distinctiveness. There was a photograph of the back of my head, evidently taken while I was cooking, showing a circular expanse of scalp thinly rimmed with greying hair—it could have been the head of any bald man. The text, written with considerable feeling, commented sharply on the eccentricities of Dr Krishnan, the famous biochemist, his passion for

barbaric and bitter brews which he concocted himself, and his overbearing manners. And with the infallible inaccuracy of his tribe, the young man had added that Dr Krishnan went about, at home, clad only in a jade-green *lungi*!

The Road to Ruin

When I was young, the rage among my contemporaries was a set of sleeve-links, depicting the main roads to ruin—in fact, they were called the Road to Ruin links, rolled-gold squares each with a beautifully finished enamelled picture on it, one of a whisky bottle, another of a racehorse, the third of a voluptuous and scantily-clad woman and the fourth of three aces. Nothing so vague as ‘wine and women and song’, but specific depictions of the four things that lead a man swiftly to destitution. Explicit and true, if you look at it with detachment, but I now know that a fifth and more potent cause of ruination was wholly overlooked by the designer of those sleeve-links.

Men have been known, usually in old age, to turn suddenly virtuous and talk of women, after a lifetime of pursuit and blandishment, as the Embodiments of Evil—why, a regular galaxy of celebrated poet-saints have done so! Men have been known, after stern warnings from their physicians, to give up the bottle altogether and loudly discover quite impossible benefits in abstemiousness. And unless one is a fool of the sort that is soon parted from money, one learns that gambling does not pay, the hard way and after much loss, but in time one learns it. But once a man has been well and truly bitten by the bug of photography, there is no known cure.

I can cite a number of actual instances, and no doubt you, too, can. The saddest case, I think, was that of Singh who, finding himself getting deeper and deeper into debts, sold his camera and enlarger and vowed to

keep away. By a cruel fate that very Sunday his picture was awarded the First Prize of Rs. 50 by a weekly magazine, and at once he mortgaged his house and bought new and costly equipment—he ended up in insolvency in the summer of 1959. A. Khan, who owned three cars and a string of racehorses (they actually brought in money!) is now reduced to sponging on his old acquaintances, who flee at the sight of the man who once treated them to lavish repasts complete with three different kinds of *halwa*. Then there was Murthy, zamindar and aesthete. True that besides photography, he also had lesser addictions, women for instance—in fact, we used to look on Murthy, a dozen years our senior, with a mixture of secret admiration and openly-expressed disapproval, because it was notorious that he specialised in nude studies, and in our callow, middle-class minds beauty needed to be clothed, at least thinly. I lost track of Murthy for twenty years and then had news of him—I learnt that he had drowned himself in a singularly foul-smelling canal unable to bear the harassment of his creditors, obsessed to the last by his passion for the aesthetic fitness of things.

If you are a really deep hater, and want to ruin your enemy, the method is infallible and simplicity itself, though it means abasing yourself and losing half your capital in the process. Get him interested in photography somehow, praise his pictures with the ring of sincerity in your voice, and then present him with only the body of one of these modern, expensive single-lens reflexes—by the time he has bought the normal, wide-angle, telephoto and other lenses, and acquired all the much-advertised accessories, he will be in the gutters.

The Yes-Man

I am alone.

G and the tribal have gone away, promising to return as soon as they have found some path to the rest-house. Naturally, they have gone away together, for in elephant jungles it is not prudent for a man to go searching out paths all by himself. However, it is all right to stay put in some safe spot, and so they have left me behind.

And why should I not have gone with them, instead of staying behind? Partly because I no longer enjoy futile, uphill excursions, but mainly because G and I disagree on the vital question, in which direction the rest-house lies. I think it is to the east, across the valley, and my companion is convinced it is in the diametrically opposite direction over the hill. The tribal, recruited to carry our things, agrees impartially with both of us.

In addition to differing so radically from me over the location of the rest-house, G is constrained to add that I have absolutely no feeling for topography and that it is a wonder that a man as witless and lacking in a sense of direction as I should have elected to be a wildlifer. I do not argue the point. We have already trudged six miles, and I lack the energy for argument. Moreover the man is right and I know that I have no feeling for topography—what I resent is that this nincompoop should also know this.

I climb a convenient mound to stretch myself prone on its flat top in the tree-shade, and search my pockets.

The lighter is there, but not the cigarettes. Too late I remember that my friend had omitted to return them to me when he set out on his ascent of the hill. However, it is pleasant and cool in the shade, and there is a faint breeze stirring, though the sun is fierce outside, and I fall asleep. There are few things in life that I enjoy more than a nap on the ground when I am tired.

After awhile I am awoken by a sustained trampling sound. Some heavy animal is coming towards me through the thorn-bush covering the hill. Not an elephant, surely, for no elephant makes so much noise moving through bush cover. I wonder what creature it is that is so clumsy and careless in its movements, and fail to think of the obvious. In another minute G and the tribal comes out of the cover and crosses the clearing towards me.

'Cigarettes!' I demand, stretching my hand out, but G stops suddenly five yards from me and turns towards the tribal.

'Do you know the way home?' he asks.

'Yes,' replies the man. He has never said no so far.

'Then why the hell didn't you say so, you son of a jackass and a big, fat sow!' he shouts at the tribal, in a sudden excess of fury.

The tribal squirms and puts his hands together in a gesture of supplication.

'Please don't get angry, sir,' he begs of G. 'You are my father and my mother.'

'You know where the rest-house is?'

'Yes.'

'Where is it?'

The tribal points to the north.

'How far?'

'Near.'

'How near?'

The man scratches his thighs in puzzlement. 'Not far,' he says, 'near.'

I get up and recover my cigarettes from G, and we follow the tribal across the clearing and then a little dip. There is a little rise beyond, and beyond it is the rest-house.

Limes and Rose-Garlands

Till some years ago it was customary to offer the man one wished to honour (especially a district officer) a rose-garland and a lime, as a gesture of goodwill. Such a charming gesture, I think, and so truly Indian, but somehow it has fallen into disuse since India's independence.

I have a suspicion that a false notion has caused its decline, the idea that it smacks of flattery and the attempt to curry favour. The idea! No present can be more unexceptionable, for its entire point lies in its uselessness. A basket of bananas, a basket of brinjals even, may carry the taint of intention to influence, but what can anyone do with a lime and quick-fading flowers? They will neither keep as mementos, nor serve any useful purpose.

I have heard of a sub-judge who handed over his gift limes to his cook for conversion into a beverage, but that only showed what an utilitarian boor he was. There is only one way for a gentleman receiving the gift, if he is a gentleman—he squeezes the lime a little, till the aromatic oil in its rind is expressed, and smells it appreciatively; then he plucks a fresh petal from the garland and conveys it to his mouth.

In fact, I can attest to the sheer impossibility of unduly influencing anyone with lime and rose-garland. Once, I visited a celebrated hill-top shrine in the south along with a District Judge and his retinue. Word of the judicial coming had somehow reached the temple authori-

ties in advance, and they were waiting on top with much the largest rose-garland I have ever seen and a fresh, green lime.

However, it was the silk-clad cook of the judge, who had climbed the steps ahead of us (being lighter and more active), who received this magnificent welcome. I am not given to prayer, but that day I thanked God politely in his shrine for rising above mortal estate.

It has always been my ambition to be the recipient of this compliment—unluckily, I am no district officer. But all things come to him that waits, and some time ago my wish was gratified. I was accompanying a personage on a tour, as his secretary, and it had been arranged that at a certain junction (where we stopped for quite half an hour) a contractor should interview my boss.

As our train drew in I observed the contractor on the platform, with a basket in which a thick rose-garland lay coiled like a python beside him. Imagine my delight when I saw, on his removing the garland to fulfil its function, a lesser garland and a lesser lime reposing at the bottom of the basket!

It was clear that he had not forgotten the obliging secretary, who had arranged the interview for him. Gracefully I bent my neck to receive the honour, when it was my turn, and accepted my lime with a smile that I had rehearsed so often previously. I dared not squeeze that lime and there was no point in smelling it, for it was evident its sere rind held no aromatic oils, but I plucked a petal from my garland and conveyed it daintily to my lips. It was oleander.

A Tale of Woe

When I reached the station with time to spare, I learned that the train I was to meet would be two hours late. Well, there was nothing for it but to wait, and I found myself a comfortable chair in the Upper Class Waiting-Room. There was another man in the waiting-room, in the only other long chair there, a dark, tall man of my own age, with a tough, wiry figure that I could not help envying.

His clothes were immaculately tailored, and everything about him suggested taste and care—only, on his lean, dark face there was a look of stark grimness. From the way he kept glancing at the clock on the wall, I guessed that he, too, was waiting for the train, but though I like company when I have to wait I did not speak to him. For the first time in my life, I was suddenly conscious of the shabbiness of my clothes.

After a while it occurred to me that it would be just as well to get a snack from the refreshment room. I rose lazily from my chair, but rising and getting to the door in one smooth, effortless movement, this man left the waiting-room before me. I followed him as he went straight to the Western-style Restaurant, but I did not enter it after him. At its spring-tensioned, wire-gauze-covered door I halted, took out my purse, and counted the money in it. Then I walked on the door beyond it, to the Indian Refreshment Room.

When I got what I wanted at the counter, and took it to one of the marble-topped tables, I found my late

companion already installed there, with a plate of four *iddlis* in front of him which he was eating with forlorn daintiness. I felt amused to think that he, too, had been prompted by the same thrifty thought, but though a motive shared is a good beginning for an acquaintance, I did not speak about it.

Instead, I remarked that it was funny how one felt hungry in an anticipatory way; if the Express had been on time, neither of us would have cared for this snack in between meals, but though we would both get home in good time for lunch in spite of the train's delay, here we were, fortifying the inner man! He listened politely, with no relaxation of the grim look on his face, and then spoke, in a sad, cultured voice.

‘I’m always hungry,’ he said.

‘Thank God, in the remote little village to which I have retired, I can still eat like a man, but now I am on a business visit to this city, and since my niece and her husband live here, I have to stay with them. I would gladly have gone to some decent hotel, if there are still any left in this place, but I don’t want to hurt my niece. You see, I am rather fond of her.

‘And do you know what they have for breakfast in their home? Two tablespoons of a patent cereal, two tablespoons of hot milk and a pinch of sugar, a boiled egg and a thinly-buttered slice of bread, and a cup of coffee! For lunch there is chicken or mutton curry and rice, and everyone gets one piece of meat, and even the vegetable side-dish is rationed—and my niece takes a green capsule, and her husband a pink mixture after lunch. There are two biscuits per head at tea, and dinner is a repetition of lunch, except that there is even less to eat and a banana for dessert!

'I know what you want to ask; you want to know why I don't go out and have my fill at a hotel, but I have told you already, I don't want to hurt my niece's feelings. Moreover there are no hotels anywhere near her house.'

'That's why I' phoned the station this morning, to find out what trains were running late, and sneaked off to meet an imaginary friend. Only three more days to go, and I can meet at least two more imaginary friends in that time. I must say I am rather disappointed with these *iddlis*, but still, they are filling. But tell me, is your *massala dosai* any good? Might as well try a little of that before I go home to my niece's lunch.'

A Real Pen and a Man's Pen

The truth is they no longer make them that way. Regrettable, even deplorable, but still the truth. These are the days of self-filling pens that one just dips into the ink, ball-point pens that one doesn't even dip in ink, and streamlined bodies, nibs and clips. What else can one expect, in this age of mass-production?

I remember my old fountain-pen, the one that got stolen by a man who subsequently became a Cabinet Minister; he stoutly denied the theft, but the facts of the occurrence were almost conclusive. One fine day, while I was in the chemistry laboratory engaged in some intricate titration, I noticed that my pen was no longer with me, and the next day, in the same lab, I observed that this man (who was my classmate) had an identical pen which, he swore, he had bought from a passing vendor in the street. A likely story! That pen had a big vulcanite barrel and cap, both marbled prettily in brick-red and black, and a hand-made nib of solid, 14-carat gold. They say that a shepherd can tell each one of his charges from all other sheep because he knows every hair on it, and I knew every black, wavy streak on that pen. But let us be charitable to a man who has, unlike me, risen to a position of public responsibility—let us believe that some attendant in the lab swiped my pen and then swopped it for a packet of cigarettes with a man in the street who, in turn, sold it to my classmate. A likely story, indeed!

Well, that was a genuine fountain-pen if ever there was one, a real pen and a man's pen. It held almost

an ounce of ink, and once filled would write for a month without interruption; and it had a clip to its screw-cap that stayed clipped, a safe, strong clip with a grip like a vice, none of your slick, shiny, stream-lined modern clips that are decorative rather than functional.

Another pen of that era, the one that saw me through the B.A. degree examination and other ordeals, is still with me. This pen, too, will hold a fair store of ink, but exhausts its fill in a mere eight foolscap pages, because it has what was known, among the cognoscenti in the days when pens were pens, as a 'signature point'—a big, strong nib with a square, chisel tip, fully 1/16 of an inch across—naturally such a nib is prodigal of ink. This nib is still in perfect condition, though it has been used repeatedly as a watchmaker's screw-driver, to fasten the tiny, delicate screws on my cameras and to unscrew them, and put to sundry other uses. I bought it in 1931, shortly after losing the pen with the marbled body (never mind how) expressly for use in public examinations, so that with my limited knowledge I could still impress my examiners by adding an 'additional book' to the six-page answer-paper provided at these ordeals. Well, I have two post-graduate degrees, in addition to the B.A.

Subsequently I have owned dozens of pens, and given many away and even lost some gladly. Most of these were presents from kind, mistaken friends who did not know that what a writer needs, for writing, is currency and not a stylus. One of my pens has crossed the Atlantic six times, to visit its makers thrice, and still fails to write after the third line, though the lifetime guarantee it carries is still valid—it is a useful pen to have displayed on the outside breast pocket at formal interviews, for its cap and clip of stainless steel and gold are most handsome, and so I keep this dummy. But

I can't help wishing that that man, who no longer needs to write much now that he occupies such an exalted position, would return the pen that he stole from me 33 years ago.

The Tack

It happened in the hardware department, and I must say there was a sort of poetic justice to its happening there, so soon after I had been sneered out of the gents' footwear and stationery departments. The sad-faced young man at the gents' footwear had eyed my feet with disapproval and informed me in a cultured voice that he was very sorry, but they didn't stock chappals.

His polite voice further informed me that maybe I would get the kind of thing I wanted at a little shop kept by a Muslim cobbler round the corner, and he was sorry again, but they just didn't deal in chappals—and all the time his eyes said, you have feet like a camel, and what do you think we are anyway that you dare to come here barefooted and demand anything so vulgar as a pair of chappals.

In reply to my pressing inquiries his voice replied, regretfully, that they did have a few pairs of Albert slippers somewhere, relics from the past they hadn't been able to sell; of course no one wore them these days and my size was probably not available—he eyed my broad feet once more—but if I insisted, why yes, he'd go and see if he could hunt them up. After half an hour he returned with three cardboard boxes containing vivid Albert slippers of crimson and gold, obviously made for Pashas in the days when there were Pashas, and, of course, all of them were far too small for me.

I didn't like the way he sighed when I left, but you can't report an assistant to the manager of a posh depart-

mental stores because he sighed. However, you can and should make such a report when the young lady at the stationery department refuses to attend to your needs or answer your questions, though no other customer is being served, merely because you are bare-footed and there is a tear in your *jibba*. The manager, a gallant though insufferably pompous man, with a superb embon-point and clad in silk, sided wholeheartedly with his salesgirl.

Finally he condescended to direct her to see if there was anything I wanted, and when the girl insisted that a flimsy mould-made paper was genuine rag-pulp hand-made paper, I thought it was time to leave that store and try my luck elsewhere. That was how I happened to pass the hardware section, for it is in between stationery and the door, and passing through I stopped suddenly in my tracks, stuck with a blue, three-quarter-inch tack in the sole of my left foot.

I am afraid I spoke my mind candidly to the elderly man at the counter who came up to see what was wrong when he saw my progress suddenly arrested and heard my sudden roar. He was really concerned. He helped me to a chair, and raced to the dispensary for iodine and cotton, after I had explained to him, unmistakably, that those were the things I wanted, not tender solicitude. And by the time he returned with these, news had got round, and the manager, the deputy manager (a harassed-looking, grey man who, I suspect, is married) and even the salesgirl from stationery were on his heels. I explained to the manager, in my most affected accent, that I had not yet plucked out the tack because I was afraid the blood would gush out and spoil his so-smoothly waxed floor.

There was an impressive flow when I did remove the

tack—much bleeding, but the cotton soaked up what there was. And while I performed the operation, assisted by everyone, I informed them all that I had heard somewhere that a chap died of tetanus or blood poisoning or something, having trod on a nail which someone had carelessly thrown on the floor in an office, and that the court, ordering generous compensation to his widow, had passed several nasty remarks about the criminal carelessness of people who left dangerous things on public thoroughfares.

By this time the man from the dispensary, urgently summoned by the manager, had arrived and he bandaged up my foot in yards of lint and guaze and, God knows why, gave me an aspirin. I was also offered a cup of hot coffee from the coffee bar attached to the stores, which I refused, and a long, foil-wrapped cigar by the manager which I accepted, with apologies for postponing the pleasure of smoking it till after dinner.

And after dinner that night I wished I had accepted the coffee, which, at least, had smelled nice.

The Rice at Arcot

We looked at each other, rose simultaneously and crossed the hall to the road, and spat out the rice in our mouths. It was nauseating, with a musty mushiness that not even the pungent, oversalted curry mixed with it could mask. We indulged in no complaint or argument—we had paid for the meal in advance. We picked up our kit and walked out.

It was four miles to Arcot town and hotels, we had had no breakfast, and already it was half-past two. As we trudged on in dejection, I remarked to Murari that it couldn't possibly have been worse.

I grumbled some more, but stopped it when I saw that my companion was not listening. He walked like a somnambulist—Murari is given to sudden transports through the centuries to the historic past.

'Remember the siege of Arcot?' he asked me. 'Remember how the sepoys gave up their rice to the British officers and lived on the gruel, and what Orme says of the siege? Well, can't you see how differently history would have been written if the rice they had then was anything like what we had!'

I could see his point: there can be few surer methods of overpowering the enemy at a siege than to supply them with such rice. But, I pointed out, all that about the rice at the siege was merely a romantic story—if I remembered my Orme, it was a namesake of his, Murari Rao of Gooty, who had expressed his 'willingness to

unsheath his sword in aid of so gallant a captain,' and saved the day for the British:

Murari pooh-poohed my objection. I was mistaken in accepting the word of a partisan, latter-day English historian in preference to the oral testimony of Indians who had actually witnessed the siege—and anyway Clive could not have held out till help came, had the rice in the garrison even remotely resembled what we had sampled!

In his humble opinion, only one of two things could have happened. After their rout at Arcot at the hands of the Nawab, the British would, naturally have left India four centuries before they did. After this, perhaps the Nawab would have entered into a treaty with Dupleix.

The more likely alternative, he continued, even if there had been some temporary arrangement with the French, would have been an ultimate pact between the Nawabs of Arcot, the Nizam, and Tipu Sultan. Such a pact, in his humble opinion, would not have led to a Muslim domination of India, for inevitably internecine fights between the parties to it, and perhaps also the descendants of the Great Moghuls.

At this point we reached the town, and entering the nearest hotel, fell to and gorged ourselves. Between us we polished off fourteen *idlis*, with sundry side-dishes, and thereafter all speculation and argument was at an end. Rice had saved the day again at Arcot.

A Feeling for Poetry

I wish I knew how Dastagir Badshah makes his living. We studied law together, but not very much together, for he was much older than any of us, wore beautifully cut *sherwanis* and caps of curly wool and kept aloof, though he was invariably courteous with an elaborate old-world courtesy that made us feel a lot of boors. In fact, I was the only one in that rather boisterous crowd whom he seemed to like, for I too cared nothing for games and such rude pastimes, and was fond of poetry, the thing for which he lived.

Unfortunately, the poets he fancied wrote in Persian and Urdu, languages unknown to me, and since Dastagir felt that no translation could ever convey the beauty and exquisite imagery of the originals, I had to appreciate the poems he recited to me by the subtle modulations of his voice and the rapture in his eyes.

One day I asked him why he bothered to study law—he seemed well-to-do, cared for the arts and leisure, and at thirty a man does not go back to college unless driven to it. He smiled his slow smile and answered me with his usual floral courtesy.

'Friend,' he replied, 'you have deep-seeing eyes. You have seen through the flimsy cloak of my studiousness, which is woven of the fibre of falsity! The law does not attract me by the delicacy of its similes or the richness of its descriptive passages—strictly between ourselves, I find it rather crude. But I wish to become the Municipal Chairman of the little town near Cuddapah

from which I come and somehow a local tradition has been established which insists on the Chairman being a lawyer. To this end, therefore, I study law.'

He passed his examinations, though I believe it is true that he ended each answer in the Criminal Law Paper with quotations from Hafiz, Saadi, Firdausi and Iqbal. Then I lost sight of him. Recently, passing through that town near Cuddapah, I remembered my polite, poetic classmate; I asked people if the Chairman of their Municipality was a delicate-featured man named Dastagir Badshah. No, he wasn't. But Dastagir Badshah, the poet, had once contested the municipal elections and had been hopelessly defeated. If I was looking for him, I should go to the Shahi Restaurant in Main Street, where he was usually to be found.

I found him there all right, in a poky little room behind the kitchen, with his companions. His welcome was effusive and long, and he introduced me by name to the five ruffians who were with him as the long-lost friend of his happy student days; he did not bother to tell me their names, but with a vague gesture towards them told me they were his friends.

He had been reading something from a closely-inscribed page to them as I entered, and I told him politely to go on with his reading, and that I had time till evening and could wait. With many apologies and after explaining that it was only a poem on the sunset he had written the previous evening, he recited a few lines in Urdu in a sing-song voice, and at the end of it his audience was visibly moved. Tears were streaming down the thick face of an incredibly fat man who sat in a corner, and another who looked like a butcher and had ferocious moustachios, kept on twirling them and muttering under his breath, 'Wah, wah! Wah wah!'

He dismissed his companions, and we talked of old times till evening, and of the things that had happened to each of us since our law college days. His wife had died years ago and he had no children—he was a widower, a lonely, ageing widower with only the consolation of poetry left him. He told me of his rout at the municipal election with much good humour, even wit. And when it was time for me to catch the six o'clock train, Dastagir saw me off, with many protestations of the sadness that filled him at my departure and pressing invitations to come again.

Three of his townsmen were travelling with me, and from them I learnt that he was not the broad-acred landlord I had thought he was. Yes, his father had left him some money, but that had been spent long ago and after his wife's death he had sold the little cottage in which they had lived, and shifted to the hotel where I had found him. By discreet inquiry I learnt that he practised neither law nor any other known profession—he just wrote poetry, surely a fine and harmless thing to do.

I wish I knew how Dastagir Badshah makes his living. I too would like to take to poetry.

Strong Thoughts in a Train

She keeps on reminding me of every little thing, and she instructs me on every detail. Bhadri, have you posted that letter you wrote last night? And did you remember to put a stamp on it? Better look in your coat pockets again, to make sure you posted it. Time you had a hair-cut—don't forget to have it on your way back from the office—not on your way to the office, mind, but on the way back—otherwise you'll go shedding bits of hair all over your office and correspondence, like a newly-clipped poodle! And look here, you'd better tie that shoelace again, tighter—it looks as if it might come untied any moment.

She tells me how to be tactful with my boss, and with whom I should be friendly. She reminds me to shave every morning and periodically inspects my wardrobe and shoes to see that I keep things tidily and in order. She sees to it that I pay my insurance premia in good time and have the car serviced regularly, and that I answer all my letters—she even saves me the bother of thought in this, for she tells me what I should write in reply. She prescribes patent medicines for me from time to time, and measures out the doses at the exact intervals specified on the label. She runs the house to an inexorable routine, and does the cooking herself, exceedingly efficiently.

And to think that only six years ago, when I married this efficiency-expert-cum-personal-physician-cum-slave-driver, what attracted me to her was her look of innocent helplessness, and that I reassured her repeatedly that

she needn't worry any more, now that she had me to protect her and look after her!

Over the past year she has been instructing me in the art and science of memory-tagging. In principle it is simple—all that you do is to develop set habits, and to keep your things in a particular, invariable manner. Then, when you want to be reminded of something automatically, you just fix things so that the routine will be broken at that point. This way, instead of noting down in your pocket note-book 'Mem: see tailor on the way back home from office', and then leaving the note-book behind at home, you park your car at the office not at the usual place, but to one side of it. Then, when it's time to go home, the odd way your car is parked reminds you to see the tailor. My wife has read it all up in some American magazine, and thinks it a most efficient, beautifully simple system. And I tell you, it is a fiendish system, and muddles up a man worse than even multicoloured tags to files!

Actually, it was her insistence on my keeping everything neatly docketed and labelled that was directly responsible for this crisis. Otherwise I'd surely have our tickets with me now, inside my cigarette-case, or safely inside the band of my hat. But she made me put the tickets inside an envelope and mark it 'Tickets' in block capitals, and then reminded me, just as we were leaving for the station, to take the tickets. And naturally I forgot them. I mean to say, it's a challenge to any man's pride and manhood, keeping on baiting him like that. No wonder I forgot the tickets!

I did some quick thinking at Gooty, when I discovered I had left the tickets behind, and I must say I have covered up things pretty nicely. Some poor chap will be in for a bad hour or two in consequence of my strategy,

but that can't be helped. Ten minutes ago, when we were crossing a bridge, I took the money and papers out of my wallet, stuffed them into my hip-pocket, and threw the wallet out of the window, into the river. My wife didn't see me doing it—she was looking at the passing scenery out of the other window, with concentrated efficiency.

When we get to Guntakal, I will get down from the compartment, saunter across the platform to the book-stall, select a magazine and loudly discover that my pockets have been picked and my wallet stolen. I will tell the Railway police that I suspect a bearded man in a blue shirt who stood close by my side while I was choosing a magazine, and then left in a hurry. There will be a hue and cry, and of course some poor devil in a blue shirt, whose wife hadn't reminded him to shave every morning, will be questioned severely—but I shan't identify the culprit positively, and am sure they can't hold him for long. And even my wife cannot blame me for having my pocket picked on a crowded platform, full of suspicious characters. But I must remember to take the tickets out of that envelope and destroy them the minute we get back home.

The Trouble with Thambi

The trouble with Thambi is that he is temperamental. He is admirable otherwise, good-natured, god-fearing, considerate and even reasonably intelligent. He does not smoke or drink and is a vegetarian, and his attitude to women can only be termed avuncular. But he is temperamental.

When he was younger, the temperament manifested itself in spells of occasional depression. He was easily hurt by what people said, though they intended no hurt, and would sulk for hours—an incongruous thing to do, for though only of average build and gentle in speech and manner, he had the most magnificent moustaches imaginable, great ram's-horn moustachios, faultlessly trained

By forty, these harmless, self-defensive sulks had matured to a brooding introspectiveness, his melancholy into something more ominous. He frowned like a thundercloud when upset, and looked like a volcano about to erupt—which was again incongruous, for by now he had abridged his moustaches to a mere toothbrush.

It was when he was forty-two that his temperament, till then self-contained for all its forbidding appearance, broke into action. He threw a bottle of ink at the Managing Director of his company, because he thought the M.D.'s comments on the poor ventilation of the Accounts Section a reflection on his integrity as its Superintendent. Unfortunately, the incident could not be hushed up in spite of Thambi's long, unblemished

record, because the bottle was uncapped when thrown and half-full of blue-black ink, and the M.D. on his way to a conference, was dressed in spotless white.

However, an honest and experienced accountant is not easily found, and Thambi had no trouble getting another post, a better-paid post, in fact. To suit his position and age, he trimmed his moustaches to a thin, black line, neat and dignified as befitted a Senior Accountant. In two years he was the Head Accountant, and had won the regard and affection of the entire firm. It was just bad luck that during a routine audit, the Senior Auditor should have commented on the quality of the whisky offered him—naturally, being totally teetotal, Thambi could not appreciate the remark, and felt outraged. He crowned the Senior Auditor with the bottle.

You know how these misfortunes get distorted and exaggerated. For a year now Thambi has been living frugally on his savings, because the most unfair and highly-coloured rumours of his temperament have preceded him, wherever he has gone. In my considered opinion, his assaulting the Superintendent of the Railway Booking Office at C.C. was an act of public-spirited duty: the entire queue cheered him when he upped and downed that domineering, sneering, obnoxious old Superintendent. I explain all this only in the hope that this might help to turn Thambi's black luck. I wonder if anyone has an opening for a highly qualified and experienced officer familiar with every intricacy of accounts and audit, middle-aged, conscientious, soft-spoken and clean-shaven.

A Provocation to Dance

To think, said Meena, that the wretched thing was lying about the house unread for almost a year! My husband bought it at a railway bookstall under the impression that *No Air to Breathe* was a detective novel, and when he found it was all about how to breathe better and better air, he ditched it. To think that any time within the last twelve months I could have used it, page by page, to clean the kerosene stove!

Then, one Sunday when his bridge cronies failed him, and he had nothing else to read, he began reading it—and life has been insufferable ever since. The book says that very early in the morning, when the dust and soot have had a night to settle and the dew has cleaned the air, is the time to breathe it in forced gulps, and now he gets up at four o'clock when it is still dark, walks a mile to the maidan outside the colony, and then jogs a mile to lend depth and volume to his breathing. Naturally he has to put on his shorts and his rubber-soled canvas shoes to run, and before he had found them and donned them the entire household is wide awake, including the baby.

I have told him a hundred times to keep the torch handy on the bedside table, so that he can get up and dress without blundering round and crashing into everything, like a bull in a blacked-out china shop, but he never remembers to do this. Anyway, when the alarm clock goes off at 4 a.m. he is the last to hear it—even the cook, sleeping in the back verandah, complains of the racket.

Imagine a man of forty-five, a lovable, quiet, heavy-built man of forty-five, sober in his dress and bearing and with the spread of middle-age lending him added dignity, running around a maidan early in the morning in a vest and a pair of brief shorts, panting like a grampus! The doctor said I was being a bit unreasonable, and that when a man is definitely past his youth, it is good for him to lose weight—but Harish's pre-dawn exercise does nothing to keep his weight down. By seven he is clamouring for his breakfast, and eats twice as much as he used to.

It is no use arguing with the man. We have suffered it for four months now, hoping it was some passing craze and that his natural good-natured laziness and love of sleep would reassert themselves, but nothing of the kind has happened. He now does eight rounds of the maidan instead of the six he began with. The only remedy is some effective reprisal. I think I will take to Bharata Natyam.

Salunke's Triumph

Should he announce it the minute he got home, or wait till after dinner? It would be more effective slipped casually into the conversation after the meal, when his wife had finished telling him all about the day's happenings—but could he contain himself till then? Salunke was still debating the question as he climbed the flights of steps laboriously to his fourth-floor flat and rang the bell.

As usual, Sharadabai took her time answering the summons. When he was away and she was alone, she always kept the door securely bolted. One never knew, she would say, one never knew. Only the other day she had read in the paper of how a man got into a first-class compartment at midnight and robbed the two occupants at the point of a dagger. She insisted on asking, 'Who is that?' when anyone rang the bell, and waiting for a reply before opening the door.

He always got home at a quarter past six, and though none of her friends would call at that hour, or even some desperate hawker, she asked him also the question, and invariably he answered, 'Office Superintendent, Madhu & Co.' This evening he purposely refrained from this silly, time-honoured pleasantries, but to his disappointment she did not notice it.

As she busied herself making his tea, she gave him the news. The child of the Ferros had the whooping cough; Kulkarni had called half an hour ago, God knows to ask what favour, but had gone away without a word on learning that he had not returned from office—no doubt

he would be back in the morning; the laundry had returned his best shirt with two buttons missing, but never mind, she would sew on fresh buttons tomorrow; there was a notice from the insurance company to say his premium was overdue. And who did he think called in the morning, soon after he left for office? Why, it was Akkubai, Akkubai who had lived next door to them when they had been in Satara—surely he remembered her and her uncanny power of predicting the future!

She was silent for a moment as she poured the tea—this was the opportunity he had been waiting for.

'Notice I was half an hour late today?' he began. 'Had to attend a little party at the office—and in whose honour do you think it was!'

She wasn't listening. She set his cup before him, and then burst out, 'Guess what Akkubai told me, reading my palm? You'll never guess! She says my line of success is so strong at this point of my life that something really good *must* happen, and that since there is no confirmation on any other line, it is through you that I will get the benefit—you must buy me a saree if my good luck brings you anything!'

Salunke smiled his thin sad smile, and said nothing. She had always claimed it was her luck that had sustained him through life. He remembered how, when he had his near-fatal attack of typhoid, she had insisted it was her *mangalva bhagyam* that had pulled him through, and how he had almost wished he hadn't recovered. And now!

Salunke never told his wife that he had been promoted that day to the post of Assistant Manager, in recognition of his long and faithful service to the firm.

Satish's Aunt

You know the sort, generally female and invariably hearty, that hails you from a distance at a wedding reception or some such crowded place, bears down on you, and then, seeing the fleeting look of blank non-recognition on your face, exclaims, 'What, have you forgotten me!'

You protest that of course you have done no such thing, and proceed feverishly to ask her how she is keeping these days, and then, suddenly recollecting that she is old Satish's aunt, inquire after good old Satish. And she tells you, and the knot of interested listeners that has gathered around by now, that she knows no one called Satish, that it is as she feared and that you have clean forgotten her. And before you can collect your stumped wits and own up that you cannot place her, and are still blabbering weak protests, she openly challenges you, to the delight of the audience, to identify her.

It is no use pointing out how natural your mistake was and how strikingly like Satish's aunt she looks—no one ever sees the justice of your defence. Finally, your inquisitor tells you who she is in an injured tone of voice, and you are none the wiser, for the name means nothing to you. But by now you are on your guard, and give her no inkling of the truth. You murmur some polite commonplaces, and on some sudden excuse get away from there, and then get farther away. Luckily, it is not hard to disappear in a crowd.

With minor variations, this is an experience that everyone has had, but what happened to me at the Madras Museum last Wednesday was a bit more complicated. My inquisitor was short, small and rotund (have you noticed how much more frighteningly hearty people are when they are small and plump, than when they are huge and towering?) and up to a point, up to the point of my identifying her as Satish's aunt, everything went according to established usage. But she did not, at this stage, revel in my embarrassment, or put on a martyred expression—she took me away from the crowd of interested listeners, right out of the museum, in fact, before discovering herself to me as Mrs Amrohiwallah. Didn't I remember her now, Aru Amrohiwallah whom I had met in Bombay in the thirties? And of course I did not, and of course I protested that now that she had told me her name, I remembered her perfectly.

She told me that she was leaving Madras the next night, and would be out the whole of the next day, doing Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram on a conducted tour, and insisted on my dining with her that night at her hotel—she would take no denial and spoke feelingly of how wonderful it was to come across someone she knew in a strange, hostile place like Madras (the sculpture was wonderful, though, and the Madrasis must once have been a highly civilised people, in the remote past), and how clearly she remembered me and my young aspirations, in the thirties.

I was at her hotel at eight sharp, and we had a most enjoyable dinner in spite of the poor fare, or rather because of it, since it was so poor that we could criticise it openly and discover a community of tastes in the process. And it was as we were grudgingly admitting to each other that the coffee at the end of the meal was not too bad, that Mrs Amrohiwallah asked me, in that

penetratingly hearty voice of hers, how I was making out ('making out' was what she said) with biochemistry, with my passion for biochemistry. Naturally I had to tell her that I never had any interest in biochemistry, and naturally this led to further questions and answers, at the end of which it was unmistakably clear that I was not, after all, the young man named Ramachandran or Ramaswami with a passion for biochemistry that she had met in Bombay in the thirties.

We had a good laugh over it all, and we each said how pleasant it had been meeting the other by a sort of double mistake, and we parted friends. But the look in Mrs Amrohiwallah's eye as she wished me goodnight told me, as plain as anything could, that Madras was a dangerous place where one had to be on one's guard against men who specialise in striking up an acquaintance with strangers on any pretext, however false, and that she had been lucky to have got away with the mere price of a dinner.

Avuncular Advice

Very well, then, have it your own way! After all, it is entirely your concern, and, if you remember, it was only because you asked for my advice that I gave it. What is that? You never asked for any advice of me, never have and never will? Well, perhaps I deserve that too!

There you were, my only nephew, my only sister's only son, telling me you were marrying this girl next Tuesday, and naturally I thought you wanted my opinion. Why bother to tell me at all, otherwise?

What is it you are saying? All you wanted was a loan for the occasion, and not my opinion, eh? Let me tell you, my boy, you get no money from me without my opinion as well! After all, six hundred is a tidy sum, and though you say you will repay it in four months, I doubt if a young man in your position can. How can you manage to put by a hundred-and-fifty each month? Why, that would leave you with just two hundred rupees, and with an expensive, newly-married wife, how will you be able to get along on that?

No, no—you misunderstand me—I never said she was a spendthrift. Only that all newly-married couples spend much more than they should, till they settle down to humdrum domesticity. Why they do it is a mystery to me for after all these years of marriage I am unable to see why any young man and woman should feel their marriage is something to be celebrated. Look at my poor sister, for instance. What did she get out of marriage

to your father? Nil nisi bonum and all that, but the fact remains that what she got out of it all was you and the insurance money, and frankly, my boy, while I am very fond of you, and have always been everything that an uncle should be to you, well, frankly, I doubt if you are worth expensive celebrations.

Now, listen to me, just listen. I am not being prejudiced and old-fashioned like your mother, and objecting to this girl because she is such an educated miss, and a South Indian. I tell you, I *like* South Indians, though, to be candid, I like them best at a distance. And I am sure this girl is really wonderful, as I am sure you think she is.

Only, it has happened so often that when a man marries a perfectly wonderful girl who is highly accomplished in all ways, he discovers subsequently that he just can't live up to her. Such a strain, I tell you, being the husband of a paragon! I know you will find it hard to realise this, being young and romantic, but believe me, what one wants in a wife is a nice, quiet, placid sort of girl, obviously less accomplished than oneself.

And my wife's niece is just such a girl as you know. In fact, my brother-in-law had asked me to make you the proposal, but I was waiting for a suitable opportunity, and meanwhile you have sprung this on me, suddenly.

Here, wait! No need to rush away like that! After all, I am only making a suggestion, and surely you can let me complete it. My brother-in-law is a reasonable man, and realising that his daughter, though such a nice, companionable girl, is not too flashily good-looking, is prepared to present you with a new motor-scooter, any make you fancy.

No? Okay, okay. I only made the suggestion, knowing how long and how much you have wanted a motor-scooter. And I am not going to be mean, as you are so sure I am. Here, take the six hundred, and my blessings! And whatever remains unpaid, at the end of four months, you can write off, as my wedding gift to you. Too late, years later, you will know the soundness of my advice, but that's no reason why I shouldn't give my only nephew a wedding present now.

The Tranquil Man

I wish Mohite would not take them. In the first place, the pills were not prescribed for him but for his wife, and I do not see what right a man has to take what the doctor has prescribed for his wife, to help her rather overstrained heart.

It all began with Akkabai Mohite developing a swelling of the eyelids and the cheeks, a slight but definite swelling that made her hard-bitten face look almost languorous. Between her and her husband they decided it was some allergic reaction, and ignored it for a week. Then they went to the doctor, and after a thorough examination the physician announced that what Akkabai was suffering from was no mere allergy but a slight cardiac insufficiency, and that she should rest more. And to help his restless patient to relax, he prescribed the pills.

They were rather fancy pills, and expensive, and Mohite, who is a cost accountant by profession, decided there was considerable economy in bulk purchase, and bought the hundred-pill bottle though the doctor had prescribed only two pills a day for a week. Well, at the end of the week Akkabai decided she could rest better in Poona with her mother and left at once, forgetting the bottle of pills in her hurry. And ever since Mohite has been taking them.

Of course, it is pure coincidence that our company should be facing a crisis now, so soon after Mohite had started on his course. Naturally a cost accountant

acquires a certain priority in any crisis, and the Managing Director, the Personnel and Industrial Engineering Manager, and his immediate Deputy (that is, me) are all almost driven to distraction by this sudden, multifaceted problem, especially by the increase in prime cost and the strike by the Workmen's Union, which refuses to go back to the cost-plus arrangement that has tided us over crises in the past. And nothing can be more infuriating, with things the way they are and tensions so high, than Mohite's total serenity. Nothing moves him, nothing even touches him.

Yesterday I had to convey a rather pointed message to him from the M.D., that unless he rose to the occasion and helped in devising some way out of the crisis, the Company would have to look out for another cost accountant immediately and he actually seemed to find the message amusing! Figures, he told me in a lazy drawl, were figures, and nothing could be done to improve them. He then went on, to my surprise and embarrassment, to talk frivolously of the inevitable signs of early middle-age in the figure of his typist.

I wish Mohite would stop taking these pills. He is the only man who can do something to help us pull through, and he just doesn't care any more. I am thinking of asking the M.D. to send an express telegram to Akkabai Mohite to come back at once—a desperate remedy, but I can think of nothing else that might succeed in shaking Mohite out of his tranquillity.

Mrs Bhalla's Dream

The trouble with Mrs Bhalla was that she had the most delicately panchromatic dreams. In them she saw strange sights in settings of improbable refinement and colour, trees with jade-green bark, and pendent violet fruits against a sky of the purest yellow, lawns of close-mown, mauve grass edged with silver-leaved herbs, and houses of ultramarine brick with roofs of salmon-pink tiles—and in such settings Bhalla, unmistakably Bhalla, except that his moustaches were of fine gold hair and not the coarse black of reality, feeding a big, olive-green bear from a feeding-bottle, or Mrs Khanna, her portly neighbour, dressed in a vermillion saree of bulging organdie dancing bhangra on her roof.

No wonder the poor woman felt worried. She had the clearest recollections of her dreams on waking, and told Bhalla all about them during breakfast, and asked him what they could possibly mean. And Bhalla a prosaic accountant by profession and a rather grossly-made man by heredity, had nothing to say, no helpful explanation in metaphorical terms, not even sympathy for his stricken wife.

In fact, he insisted on her consulting a physician, one of these modern physicians who go in for blood counts, x-rays, fractional test meals, e.c.gs, and similar tests and analyses. And finally he pronounced that Mrs Bhalla was suffering from a badly deranged liver, and should eat nothing fried or spiced, but live on slops and orange juice—a thing that naturally infuriated his patient who was inordinately fond of curries with plenty of masala

in them and a generous admixture of neatly-cut *paneer* cubes, maize roti hot from the fire with as much fresh butter as it could absorb, and all things fried, and milk-sweets.

That night she dreamed that the physician, dressed in a brilliant pink hospital coat, was hanged in public from gallows of highly polished ivory by his own stethoscope, for having murdered a young child by painting its inflamed tonsils with prussic acid and that was the end of his treatment.

Next night she dreamed a more extraordinary dream. Hitherto she had been the observant onlooker, carefully noting the exact shade of colour and the precise shape of everything, but now she herself was the subject of her dream: dressed in white, and wearing an enormous circular kumkum of emerald green on her forehead, she was being tied with a cord of steel-blue nylon to a bier of cerulean bamboo. The dream perturbed even the unfeeling Bhalla, who tried weakly to tell her that to dream of death was lucky, since it meant a long life.

A few nights later she had an even more unmistakable dream. In it her father, dead for the past twenty years, appeared in a *kurta* and pyjamas of Prussian blue silk, against a vast background of rose madder sky, and beckoned significantly to her, and she distinctly remembered asking him how much longer she had to endure life with Bhalla, and his telling her: 'Not long, *beti*, only two months more.'

Well, even Bhalla could not callously ignore such a pointed dream. He bought his wife four silk sarees, and took her to Mussoorie on a long-promised holiday, and treated her to the most highly-spiced curries and the richest sweets that money could buy at restaurants.

The trouble is that the dream keeps recurring, though in a much less emphatic manner, though it is now fully eight months since she had it first. And the discrepancy in period, as Mrs Bhalla has repeatedly pointed out, is no discrepancy at all—no doubt her father meant two months, not by our calendar, but as they reckon months in his rose madder heaven.

The Wind in Atre's Joints

I wish, said Atre, that Madhusudan Bhatt were still here; he would have known how to deal with my trouble.

He wasn't exactly a qualified physician, but he knew the ills the Indian flesh is heir to. His mother—I can remember her only as a rather frightening childhood vision, past a hundred and still unbent, with clear, light blue eyes in a brown, seamed, teakwood face—well, his mother was the daughter of a famous *vaid*, and from her Madhusudan had learnt much of his herbal lore.

And he was a learned man, too, having read his grandfather's palm-leaf manuscripts, and he was a sensible man besides and realised very early that while Western systems of medicine were objectively scientific and all that, they were meant essentially for Westerners. Here in India, we are apt to go in for peculiarly Indian ailments, and that is what allopathy, with all its marvellous backing of science, has yet to realise.

You suffer from wind in the joints and go to a modern physician, and what does he tell you? Why, he just laughs at your complaint, and assures you that there is no such thing! He tells you that he will soon find out what is really wrong with you, and refers you to half-a-dozen clinics, for x-ray pictures of your bones, an F.T.M., blood counts, urine analysis, and a microscopic examination of a thin slice of your skin.

He asks you to come back to him in a week with the

findings on all these tests, and a chart showing your temperature at six o'clock every morning and evening, and also at noon and midnight, and when you have done everything exactly as instructed and go back to him, he assures you that you have no pyrexia, either of known or unknown origin (a thing you had known all along) and that what you need to do is to revise your diet drastically, and eat five high-protein biscuits for lunch and dinner with a little orange juice instead of meals, and after a week of dieting go through all the tests again, and then come back to him.

Old Madhusudan Bhatt was so different. He just felt your pulse, and then told you straight to your face what your illness was. You are suffering from wind in the joints, he would say, or maybe it was a flatulent heart or, in an extreme case, bile on the brain, and then he would prescribe the cure.

Often one had to go on a saltless diet, or fast every Tuesday and Friday, but there was no nonsense about it, no high-protein biscuits and orange juice. He would give you a dark brown *kashayam*, to be taken at dawn, on an empty stomach, and dark green pills compounded of esoteric herbs and salts, globular and carefully adjusted for dosage, and faintly perfumed with musk or civet. And in two weeks, or may be a month at the most, you were cured.

I remember that when I was a young man of fifty-five, I had a bad go of wind in the joints, and went to Bhatt. He felt my pulse and told me what it was, and to convince me he massaged my ankles and knees with his lean, strong fingers, and the wind came out of me in great big belches. He cured me in three weeks, and for twenty years now I have never been bothered by it.

But now I have it again, and the young medico I called in can only laugh at my trouble, and keep on saying there is no such thing. Such a pity that old Bhatt educated his only son to become an engineer in far-off Bihar—otherwise, there would still have been someone who understands the true nature of the Indian constitution, and the things it is prone to.

The Do-gooder

When my neighbour to the west employed Kapali to sweep and tend her garden, I felt the neighbourly urge to warn her. The man was a known depredator, as often in jail as out of it and, in fact, had just come out after serving a three months' sentence for stealing cloth from a tailor's shop. Everyone knew that Kapali was an incorrigible thief—except, of course, my neighbour, who was a new-comer to the locality.

She thanked me for my caution, and asked what she should do. Well, that seemed pretty obvious—sack Kapali at once. How then, argued my neighbour, would the poor man be able to find a living? Granted that he was a thief, the only way to give him a chance to go straight was to give him a job; otherwise he would naturally be driven to stealing again. I should realise that we owed certain moral obligations to our less fortunate brethren, and not take the narrow and insular view that so long as our possessions were safe it made no difference whether others lived or died. And so on, and so on, and so on.

I came away feeling disgusted, and discovered that the fountain-pen and cigarette lighter I had left in my front verandah were missing. Kapali, undoubtedly. Luckily the man was still there, watering a herbaceous border in my neighbour's garden with a look of seraphic innocence on his hatchet-face, and I informed him that if my pen and lighter were not returned within five minutes, I would report their loss to the police. Apparently he had already seen to their safe disposal,

through his accomplice-cum-wife, and promptly reported me to my neighbour.

She was very patient and fairminded with me, and did not take the line that Kapali himself did, that he had had no chance to leave the garden and that we could search him. My neighbour argued that while it could have been Kapali, no one had actually seen him entering my verandah, and it could also have been someone else, some passing thief who had seen the glittering pen and lighter lying on the teapoy in my verandah through the open gate—I had left the gate open while making my call on my neighbour—and had come in and helped himself. We should realise that before we damned our already-suspect fellowmen with a definite accusation, we should at least eliminate all other possibilities.

That pen leaked and the lighter wheel was worn out, and I preferred to suffer my loss in silence to listening to another sermon, and so I withdrew my threat to report Kapali to the police. Instead, I bought a strong lock for my gate.

Others in the locality were less insular and narrowly mindful of their possessions. A saree disappeared from the clothes-line in Mr Rao's house, and a pair of gunmetal vases from the drawing-room of the house behind; a copper boiler vanished from the engineer's backyard, and finally the Alsatian puppy of the Police Inspector across the road, the pride of his heart, melted suddenly into thin air. The police people came and took Kapali away for questioning, but at the end of two days he was back in my neighbour's garden watering the herbaceous border with a beatific smile glued to his ugly mug. His wife, whom I have long suspected of being the brain behind the long arm of Kapali had evidently organised efficient, swift and untraceable means of disposal.

Several people noticed that she had acquired a new saree and a pair of earrings soon after these happenings, and once, when I thought I had caught Kapali smoking my cigarettes, I found on closer investigation that his brand was superior to mine and twice as costly. Apparently the Kapalis had come into money.

Meanwhile my neighbour had made a discovery by patiently questioning her protege. She learnt that the only formal training that Kapali had ever had was as a tailor. She had, she told me, long wanted to buy a sewing-machine, and that day she fulfilled this long-resisted wish. Very soon Kapali was installed in the carshed of my neighbour's house, busily stitching away at the new machine.

It was disgraceful the way people flocked to him with cloth for their children's shirts and blouses and frocks, and for pillowcases. His rates were cheaper than those of other tailors, and what did it matter if his work was less elegant? Children outgrew their clothes so fast, anyway.

In fact, it looked as if the miracle *had* been worked, and Kapali had actually turned over a new leaf. A man must have the time to indulge his bent, and Kapali had no time at all—he was at the sewing-machine from morning to night, pedalling away furiously, turning out dozens of plain and fancy garments all of which looked like pillowcases, but only some of which were.

Then one fine morning my incredulous ears were assailed with the hitherto-soft and sweet-reasonable voice of my neighbour raised in an angry screech.

'Ungrateful wretch!' she screamed at a crestfallen Kapali who stood stroking his lantern jaw with his paw

in embarrassment. 'Thief, rascal—now don't you dare to talk back, you good-for-nothing *badmash*! Get out of here, I tell you, get out fast before I send for the police! Replace it, eh? Did you dare to say you would replace it? And how on earth are you going to get real, imported French georgette, you murderer? Get out, I tell you... ', and her voice rose to such a shriek that even Kapali fled, never to return.

You see, she had given him a cherished bit of imported silk to be made into an old-fashioned, magyar-cut blouse with three-quarter-length sleeves, when she thought he had sufficient practice, and had given him the most elaborate instructions. And he had converted it into yet another pillow-case.

Experiences

Banaras-I

One evening I was sitting on the *pial* outside a pickle shop, chewing pan. It was time to turn homeward. I got up, and offered the remaining betel leaves to a sadhu who sat near by. He asked me something in Hindi. I replied that I had no knowledge of the language. Then we conversed in Kannada, which both of us knew after a fashion.

The sadhu said: 'I have seen you many times before now.'

'Quite possibly; I come here often.'

'Not here,' he said, and I was left wondering where else he could have seen me. He presented the betel leaves I had given him to a goat that stood by with expectant eyes, and turned to me.

'Bhai, do you remember your last birth?' he asked.

After thinking it over I confessed that I did not.

'In your last birth you were born in the far South, near the course of a stream, in a Brahman household. In your boyhood you knew comfort, even luxury. Then whatever you touched was blighted, in all things you failed, and you wandered along tenuous tracks in search of a livelihood. In spite of your misfortunes, it never occurred to you to contemplate the greatness of His clemency—you had thought only for sensuous pleasures. You slaved for your living, subordinate to others, anticipating their least desires. Yes, you have known thin times!'

I was petrified, for I knew at once that every word he had said was true. Only, it was no previous birth that he described, it was this very birth. It could easily happen to a sage reckoning innumerable incarnations that he should miss one. I addressed him eagerly.

'Think well, Maharaj, and tell me this—when those days of want were spent, afterwards, did I not live in ease and plenty?'

The sadhu laid his hand on his matted locks and was silent for awhile.

'Nothing of that sort seems to have happened,' he replied at last, 'but at the moment my recollections of your past birth are somewhat dim. Meet me tomorrow evening, and if anything comes back to me by then, I shall tell you. But why are you so excited over this?'

I did not meet that sadhu again. I saw him once in the bazaar, but turned my face the other way and walked swiftly on.

Banaras-2

At sunset we reached Banaras.

It was twenty-five years since I had seen the city, but I had spent a whole month in it then, and remembered every hour of it. It was then that I had, slowly but inevitably, grown less sure of the values of my somewhat Anglicised and scientific education, and come to understand the culture that was my birthright. And this had been no mere intellectual conversion, brought about by discourses with learned pundits or sustained introspection. I had spent almost every afternoon in the narrow, crowded, stone-paved bazar streets around the shrine of Vishwanath, or at the waterfront, watching the passing pageant of life in India—naked sadhus, women veiled from head to foot, women smothered in costly ornaments, lepers, well-dressed men going home from the temple with flower garlands around their necks, big, bearded he-goats, scholars, priests, enormous sacred bulls with redundant humps, men bearing biers, children, camels—anything, I realised, could happen in Banaras, and usually did.

As we neared the old city, the stolid, factual Forest Department official accompanying me steadily deflated my rising expectations. Banaras, he informed me, was no longer what it had been, a congested centre of pilgrimage and pleasure. It was a great modern city now, with its own spacious university, a most efficient system of underground drainage, many fine shops and magnificent, new buildings—the pontoon bridge across the Ganges I had known had been demolished and replaced with a gigantic iron overbridge recently, above the railway

bridge, providing for traffic both ways, and a superb new Vishwanath temple had been built. A spike from a bullock's shoe piercing one of the wheels of our jeep stopped his steady flow of information, and we drew up to one side of the overbridge to replace the flat tyre with the stepney. A train thundered below us, and the passing motor vehicles contributed further to the perilous reverberations that shook the bridge and us, as we stood near the railings. Then suddenly I saw what I had failed to see while inside the jeep. The sun was going down over the blue haze of the city on our left in a dull crimson orb, and to our right a full moon was just rising, pale in the dusk that was not darkness yet, but opulent still. The spheres of crimson and palest gold, of a size almost, hung low on the horizon on either side of us, as if balancing the inverted bowl of the darkening sky. It could happen only in Banaras!

As we drove through the bazar, I noted with delight that nothing had really changed. The shops selling scents and cosmetics, sweets, pickles, pan, silk and decorative brassware were all there, and the streets were as narrow and crowded as I had known them. A sudden cross-stream of gaily dressed people emerging from a by-lane halted us, and as we waited for them to cross, a line of four camels passed us and the last, a great, gaunt, elaborately caparisoned beast, stretched its neck forward and looked down on us condescendingly, with a supercilious sneer. Banaras was still Banaras, for all its modern edifices and improvements.

We went on to Sarnath for the halt overnight in spite of my protestations, for somehow my companion felt convinced that I would find its manifest peace and quiet relaxing, and he was not a man lightly dissuaded. Sarnath has always had a disturbing effect on me—

chaotic recollections from my wide and unbridled reading of poetry keep coming to me there.

We went to a wayside eating-house for dinner, and six colourfully dressed Buddhist priests, probably from Tibet, were also having a late tea there. I stood at the entrance, waiting for the meal to be served, and one of the priests was standing beside me. A sudden gust of wind blew his voluminous robes all around him and even around me, and he turned to me with a toothy smile and said something I did not understand.

‘We are the voices of the wandering wind
That moan for rest and rest can never find—
Lo! as the wind is so is mortal life,

A moan, a sob, a sigh, a storm, a strife!’ I replied.

He turned quickly away from me, as if from something evil, and rejoined his companions, but I was only quoting from *The Light of Asia*, and it was the quintessence of Buddhism that those lines conveyed.

After a night of tossing about in bed, with bits and pieces from the classics of English and Tamil interrupting sleep, I got up at five in the morning, and soon after we left for Mughalsarai, to catch our train. And as we crossed the iron overbridge at Banaras, not even quivering it as we passed alone along it, the wan, full disc of the moon was sinking to our left and a resplendent, red sun rose to the right.

A King at Seven

One of my most prized possessions is a crumpled bit of paper with this message on it in English, in a remarkably firm and legible hand: 'I am alright and am going to sleep. You can have your diner there.'

This is the first letter I ever received from my son, then rising seven. For reasons that I need not detail, English was the only language we had in common then. The boy had a fever, when my wife and I left in the evening to pay a brief call; we were pressed to stay for dinner, and if we did, could get back only very late—and there was no one at home to look after the sick boy excepting old Sita Bai, my cook, a most trustworthy person, but one who was as wax in my son's young hands. Therefore I sent a note to the patient, asking him if he minded our staying on for dinner, and this was the reply I got. Naturally, I felt proud of the brave spirit and literacy it displayed, and exhibited it to my friends.

It was fully a year later that I came to know of happenings at home that night, and other days and nights when we were not at home, or were too busy to watch our son's activities closely. A regular Parallel Government had been established in the house unknown to us, and was being run much more efficiently than ours. Our subjects, of course, were common—but then this is the test of a parallel government—being the cook, the goat-boy and his little sister (I had a herd of milch-goats in those days), the 11-year-old office boy who lived in the house (I had an office at home, in those days), the maid-servant and the two dogs.

One day Sita Bai took the day off, promising to get back in time to cook my dinner. My wife and son had left on a week-end visit to Bellary, and I had planned to have my lunch at a friend's house. But somehow this plan miscarried, and forgetting that my cook would not be there, I returned home at one o'clock, feeling ravenously hungry. The kitchen-cum-pantry was locked, but I knew how to open this lock, and when I raided the kitchen I got the surprise of my life.

There were no less than four different kinds of dry chutneys in four tightly-closed tins, and two jars of some delicious pickle I had never tasted before; there was a large bottle half full of honey, and in the store-room I found a big bunch of bananas hung up to ripen slowly in the dark, and in a pot, several large, maturing woodapples. I also found a thick, cold *jowar-roti* wrapped up in the goat-boy's grimy towel, evidently the surplus from his pack-lunch that he had reserved for the evening. I fell to, and gorged myself. The *roti* was insipid in the extreme, but then the honey had a rich flavour, and those chutneys and pickles would have imparted a tang and relish to sawdust.

That evening, when old Sita Bai and the goat-boy were back, I learnt who the real Master of the House was. My son had his meals much earlier than we did, and with a consideration touching in one so young, had permitted us to absent ourselves from the kitchen when we ate, saying that Sita Bai was quite sufficient company. And to her he had given certain definite instructions. He had pronounced the food we ate unfit for human consumption, and had ordered her to prepare and store several kinds of chutneys, and pickles, and similar things, and further warned her that in no circumstance was she to tell either my wife or me of this arrangement. The honey and the woodapples had been procured from the

jungles by the goat-boy, and the bananas came from the banana-garden of the maid-servant's husband.

For over a year my son had been ordering the menu for each meal he ate, and had effectively kept his private store of choice pickles and chutneys a secret from us.

From the office boy I learnt further details of the ruthless efficiency of the young tyrant. Neither my wife nor I could be at home in the evenings, and when, on occasion our son had to take some medicine then, we had always trusted him to do so, taking care only to pour out the dose correctly. On our return he would inform us that the medicine had been taken, and the ounce-glass would be empty. I now discovered that while this statement had always been unexceptionably true, there were hidden depths to it, and that the unfortunate office boy had been firmly held down by the goat-boy, while my son administered the dose of medicine to him. However, there was a broad impartiality in the distribution of these special favours; pills and powders had usually been given to the goat-boy's little sister, and every evening the goat-boy was compelled to learn the English alphabet and basic arithmetic.

Even the dogs had been won over. They sided openly with my son against all comers, including me.

I am sure that my son, who has had the same scientific education as I and therefore knows that truth is more important than all else, including prestige, will not mind my divulging the fact that he has responsibilities and duties now, being a husband and a father, and, worse still, a Government Servant, and that in the evenings he attends to the files that have come to his house from his office, instead of the affairs of a private empire. How are the mighty fallen!

A Poet in the Flesh

It is very many years since I met a live poet, but I have vivid recollections of the experience. And when, I say a poet, I mean a poet, not an amateur furtively inscribing his effusions into a slim notebook, not a diletante contributing an occasional verse to some magazine in the latest idiom of obscurity, but a man whose profession and vocation is the writing of poetry.

I was an employee of All-India Radio in those days, and the meeting with this poet—he was a Telugu poet, incidentally—was not of my choice, but an assignment. When I called on him, at his cottage on the outskirts of the city, he was out. An elderly man, reposing on a mat on the *pial* (a father or an uncle, perhaps) informed me that he had just left and might be back within the hour. If I cared to wait... well, I did not. I learnt that the poet would be at home in the afternoon, and fixed an appointment for 4 o'clock with the old man.

When I called in the afternoon, the elderly man was still on the mat on the *pial*, and the poet had just left again. Asked if he had been told of my morning visit, the father or the uncle replied that he had, that he knew I would be coming, but had left on some urgent errand and would be back soon. The man rose from the mat, rolled it up, indicated the *pial* to me with a hospitable gesture, and went inside the house with his mat. Perhaps there was another *pial* inside.

At 5 o'clock a burly, dark man of about thirty, clad in a voluminous *jibba* and dhoti and with a silk *uparna* flung over a shoulder, came sauntering in—evidently the poet.

His cheeks bulged with the enormous quid of betel he was chewing.

He came up to me, took me effusively by both hands, sat down on the *pial* by my side, and beamed at me. I informed him that I had been waiting for an hour, and he beamed at me again. Apparently his mouth was too full of betel nut and *pan* for speech or apology, or else he was a dumb poet.

I was thoroughly irritated by now. Poets might seem very special people to my Station Director and even awe him, but I suffered from no such delusions. My father had been a quite considerable poet in his day, every member of the family could write formally flawless verse, and I had known many poets in my youth who had visited my house. When I am irritated, I often adopt the patient, long-suffering attitude of an elder explaining something to a backward child in words of one syllable, carefully enunciated. I explained to the poet that I was from All-India Radio, that I had been asked to do a brief note on him, and would be glad to hear him on himself and his poetry.

He asked if I knew Telugu, and I confessed I did not. He asked if I had heard nothing about his poetry, and I told him truthfully that I had taken the precaution of asking the Telugu Section people of the broadcasting house about him, and that they had given me a succinct account.

'Then we needn't talk about it,' he declared in obvious relief. 'I want to tell you about something else that is bothering me. You are angry with me, because I came late—no, no, don't tell me you aren't—I know you are. And I know I kept you waiting. I can't explain it,

but I just had to leave the house. Don't be angry with me.'

I felt nonplussed. Here was a man who could have mollified me easily with a formal word of regret for having kept me waiting, and who, instead, had neatly reversed the position, making me feel that it was I that owed him an apology!

'Of course I knew you were coming at 4 o'clock,' he continued. 'I feel so ashamed that knowing it, I can offer you nothing—I did keep something for you, some milk-sweets from West Godavari that a friend had sent—but that old man whom you met, he ate it all up.'

'Your father or uncle?' I asked, more to cover my embarrassment than anything else.

'No, no!' he replied. 'Nothing like that. He's a man from my village and I owe him some money. Since he had to come to the city anyhow, he is staying with me. He hopes to collect his money from me, incidentally.'

'Will he get it?' I asked.

For a long time the poet was silent, deeply pondering the question, and finally turned to me.

'I think he may get a part, a good part,' he informed me.

A sudden thought moved him.

'Wait a minute,' he said, beaming at me again, and disappeared into the house.

He returned with a box of matches and two thin,

black, dry-looking twigs, one of which he offered me! It was a Lanka cheroot, and he was glad when I told him what it was and how the ash, when it formed, would be firm and white.

Each of us lit a cheroot, leaned back against a wooden pillar, and relaxed on the *pial*. He told me that these were not Lanka cheroots, actually, but from Kakinada. In the best kinds, the smoke was so strong that if you blew it at a spider, it would be stunned.

There was a spider on a web right above my head, and I sent a thick blast of the white smoke straight at it. It did not fall down, but it had been moving its spindly legs rapidly and now it was quite still. Well, that was fair enough.

Afterwards, I asked him to recite his poetry to me, for though I had no Telugu I wanted to listen to the cadence and flow of it, for I knew that in true poetry the sound of the lines is important. I listened to his low, soft, lazy voice for quite some time, to the rhythmic and phonetic patterns and nuances of his verse. It was a memorable experience.

My write-up about him for A.I.R. was not merely enthusiastic, but a sincere tribute. And, as I said, I have not met a poet in the flesh afterwards—perhaps because I apprehend that none of them can live up to my recollections of the last one I met.

The Death of a Tyrant

The most unforgettable event of my school days was the sudden death of the History Assistant. He was the only master who was hated by everyone, a formidable mountain of a man who took delight in discovering our least defaults, and punishing us brutally with impositions and canings. Those were days when schoolmasters were allowed not to spare the rod, and several times he had caned boys so severely that he drew blood, and in consequence of the protests and threats of the parents of his victims the Headmaster had actually warned him—that is to say, the Headmaster who, I now feel sure, was terrified of him, had sent on the parental letters of outraged indignation to the old tyrant and suggested moderation for the future.

He was hated and feared by the other masters as well. By virtue of his seniority in service—he had been History Assistant at the school for over 25 years—he spoke slightly of them as tyros, and generally threw his weight about, and at the least provocation challenged them to draw a map of India as it was in the Mauryan epoch, something which he could do brilliantly and which none of them could. In fact, he was both erudite and singularly talented, and was an authentic eccentric—he collected scraps of paper from the gutters, bleached, ironed and cut them into neat rectangles, and used these as his personal stationery. They were as scared of his knowledge and skills as they were of his overbearing manners and sheer size, and as I said even the Headmaster avoided encounters with him.

And in his immediate neighbourhood, they feared

and avoided him as much as they did at school. He lived two doors away from me by himself in an old, converted stable, and I knew how much people dreaded him in that locality.

But one afternoon, when he suddenly collapsed and died in Form V-B with no warning, the entire school went into mourning. The school remained closed for two days thereafter as a mark of respect to his memory and that evening, when the Headmaster assembled us all in the Common Room and spoke of the learning and stern sense of duty of the old war-horse, who had died in harness, there were tears in his eyes.

During the next two days, forced to stay at home because school was closed, I heard what a wonderful and great man we had lost—someone even remembered his giving away an old, torn shirt to a beggar and commented on his kindness to the poor.

At that time I felt sorely perplexed, but now I understand it all. To die memorably one must be a superman *and* be lucky, or else be a thoroughgoing tyrant. Naturally, no one remembers our wishy-washy selves after we pass away, for there is no sense of relief. But when a genuine tyrant dies, we at once do all we can to efface the living image of him so that no dreadful shade of it survives, we declare holidays in his honour and sing his praise, and discover sudden streaks of mildness in his make-up. By this test, neither Attila nor Genghis Khan was an authentic tyrant; they must have had some human weakness in them that made people be unafraid to speak the truth about them after they had died, but that old History Assistant, he had none.

A Riverside Slum Fire

March was the driest month of the year, when the river was only a meander of shimmering sand, and even drinking water was not easy to get. So, when the fire broke out in the riverside slum that March night, we knew it was useless seeking water to quench the flames. We quickly organised several teams to relay assorted containers of sand from the river-bed to the blazing huts, and threw the sand over the flaming beams and thatches.

One man whose house stood in the path of the spreading fire had a well, and he lost no time in drenching his roof and walls with water drawn thirty feet up from the well. This deluge of possessive zeal, and the rain of sand we poured over the flames, soon halted the conflagration.

Only some half-a-dozen huts, nearest the river, had been affected. These now stood smouldering and crackling, radiating a warm, menacing glow. Their unnaturally luminous rafters and doorways made a vivid pattern against the night, a pattern that, for all its disastrous import, was not without loveliness. Our eyes were red and smarted with the thick brown smoke, our nostrils burned with the raw pungency of burning wood, and we were covered with sweat from the heat and effort. From time to time a glowing beam cracked with a report like a cannon, hurtling sparks and burning splinters that sent us leaping back.

I was standing away from the crowd, near the wreck of the endmost hut, feeling rather jittery. Luckily no one had been trapped inside the huts, but seeking to help a frantic householder with the rescue of his belongings, still

inside his incandescent hut, I had had a narrow escape. The brightly-burning doorway had fallen just as I tottered out, smoke-dazed, with half a bag of millet—luckily it had fallen inward, not out on me, but I was still not feeling too sure of myself.

Near me stood a strong, middle-aged man, the late tenant of that endmost hut, consoling a young woman. The girl sat on the ground at his feet, crouched over a tin box, staring with unseeing eyes into the red ruins of the hut, whose roof and doorway still stood limned in unearthly, luminous vermillion against the darkness of the smoke and night. He was telling her to have courage and stay there, while he tried to rescue the chicken—and she was clutching at his hands, entreating him not to leave her alone. Finally the man asked me to stay there, by his wife, while he tried to save his chicken—she was, he informed me with pride, a tender-hearted girl, and had been badly frightened by the fire. Then he went away to fetch a long goatherd's crook, with which he hooked out the cackling basket. I had thought he could retrieve his chicken only in a roast, so fierce was the heat, but surprisingly the birds had taken no harm.

The man was quite jubilant after this. He told me how lucky he had been, not to lose anything. All his earthly possessions were there, in the tin box and the basket of chicken. The hut? No, it wasn't his, in fact he owed a month's rent—and who could ask him to pay, after this fire? He helped that strapping young woman to her feet and picked up his box and basket, but before he went away from there he explained once more how his wife wasn't selfish, or inefficient, or anything like that. It was just that she had been too badly scared to think of taking the basket of chicken, when she had rushed out of the flaming hut—don't you see, he said, it was just that she took fright at the fire, being tender-hearted.

Regrets in the Rain

Nowadays, when it rains, I just sit at home and mope.

I have no umbrella. Never had any. Such ungainly contraptions, don't you think? So easily wrecked in the high winds that accompany the monsoon in these parts! Till last week I had a mackintosh, a beautiful neutral-brown mackintosh, presented to me by a niece on my last birthday; a bit short in the sleeve and rather tight round the middle, but mind you, it was made of very superior waterproofing and cost all of 45 rupees.

Last week, hurrying out to an appointment through the rain with important papers in the pocket of my mackintosh, I discovered that the papers had been drowned beyond redemption in transit, and that my trouser legs were unfit for any appointment, being drowned likewise. Though really waterproof, my mackintosh let in the rain freely through the pockets where the water collected, before cascading down the trousers. And in a fit of rage I bundled up the offending garment when I got back home and presented it to Muniyandi, the rickshawman at the corner.

Of course I told him about the way the pockets collected rain and then let it down in cascades down one's trousers into one's shoes. But he didn't mind that at all. He said he had no trousers or shoes to get wet, and nothing to put into the pockets of the mackintosh that would take harm from a ducking. So I gave it to him, and straightaway he took it to the tailor round the corner and had the

pockets securely sewed up for eight annas, and now he has a mackintosh that is truly rain-proof. He has even had the buttons moved nearer the edge so that it is no longer tight in the body, and he goes about in the rain snug and dry in his mackintosh, while I mope at home.

I wish the idea had occurred to me first. There was really no need for the pockets for, after all, I could have carried the things I needed on my person, in the pockets of the other garments inside the mackintosh. When I see Muniyandi parading in the rain, I feel I have been a fool, and cannot help a boiling sense of envy.

My first impulse was to call him and explain how I had made a mistake, pay him a couple of rupees for his idea and tailoring charges, and reclaim the garment. But my family will not hear of it. They say that would be an incredibly mean thing to do: something no gentleman can ever stoop to. I argue that I am no gentleman anyway, being a writer but they remain unshaken in their veto.

In fact, they feel quite concerned for me. They are convinced that something must have happened to me, that due to overwork or a nervous breakdown or both I have sunk so low in body and mind that I can think such thoughts. They feel I need rest—badly. Moreover, they warn me that they will disown me in a body if I so much as mention the mackintosh to Muniyandi.

As I watch Muniyandi recrossing the road in the downpour, supremely indifferent to the fury of the elements, it occurs to me that it is not indispensably necessary that one's family should own one all the time, that a small lapse from such solidarity will not matter. But I doubt very much if he will part with his mackintosh for two rupees or even for five—his pride in his new-found cloak is so manifest as he goes about, needlessly courting the

monsoon. Furthermore, nothing can be more disastrous than a futile attempt at recovery, for then I would lose my reputation for gentlemanliness and the still unforfeited regard of my family without getting the mac.

And so I follow the prescribed cure and rest, slumped dejectedly in the verandah chair, while Muniyandi goes strutting through the rain.

A Question of Faith

You must have faith, said the sadhu, you must have unquestioning faith. And you must follow the ritual strictly, step by step. There are 230 stone steps to be climbed before you reach the shrine, and half-way up there is a shady *pilal* tree beside the steep path; you might feel tempted to sit in its shade for a while, but it is best to go on. Your faith must be strong enough to overcome such weaknesses of the flesh.

You must bathe in the cold, sacred water of the little hill-top pond, then circle the shrine to the right, and then have *darshan*, and it is important that when you are in the *garbhagriha* and praying, your prayer should be free from any kind of wish or asking. Afterwards you come out, feeling relaxed and at peace, circle the shrine to the right again, and standing outside the eastern gateway, facing the morning sun, you may wish three wishes, and all of them will be granted. Only, there must be no tincture of self in your wishes: you must wish no profit or satisfaction for yourself, but only something for others and then your wishes will be granted at once, however difficult or improbable that may seem.

What is that? You want to know why you must not ask for anything while actually praying, but only afterwards, when outside the shrine? Well, that is the prescribed ritual, and ritual is not subject to the crude inquiries of human logic. It is true, as you point out, that since even afterwards there can be no benefit to the devotee, there can be no taint of self if the wishes were addressed direct to the Lord while praying, but that is

barred by established prescription. Neither you nor I can understand the why of such things, nor should we seek to—as I said, it is a question of faith, and faith transcends all reason.

It is absolute and infallible, and though you must be spontaneous and fervent in your wishing, you need not be reasonable. You may wish that some poor man you know, some harassed, hopeless underling, should become a millionaire overnight, and it will happen; you may wish the immediate recovery of a neighbour's dying child whom the physicians, and even its mother, have given up, and the child will rise from its sick-bed, well and strong; you may even wish, impersonally and out of righteous indignation, for the downfall of a tyrant, and his fall will be both swift and certain. Only, there must be no suspicion of personal profit in your wishes.

Ah, your logic again! You want to know how I can be so sure of all this, you ask if I have myself experienced the truth of what I say, or known it from the experience of others! I will be honest with you. There is no personal experience behind my conviction—nor has anyone I know ever climbed that hill to the shrine on top and had his wishes granted. But that is not because what I told you is not utterly true—only because, after performing all the rites meticulously and offering sincere prayer, no one has been able to resist incorporating some hidden personal gain in his wishes, because the Lord is all-seeing and not to be fooled.

The Death of a Dog

Behind my house was the Boya colony, a clutter of thirty huts over which old Siddha ruled. Herdsmen and hunters originally, the Boyas no longer hunted for a living; in fact, unlicensed hunting was prohibited by law, but anything unlicensed is dear to the heart of a Boya, and they still sought out pigs in the outlying jungles, furtively with dogs and spears for flesh and excitement.

Siddha had been a mighty hunter in his youth. I admired his dog, big and hard-muscled, with a perfectly balanced build and quicksilver responses; it held itself aloof and ignored my friendly overtures, walking away with lordly dignity if I was insistent. Old Siddha's hunting days were over, but he had fancied the dog as a puppy and reared it with loving care; however, it was to his nephew that it had attached itself, a shy young man who avoided me studiously, for I was the Magistrate of the place, and Boyas have little liking for magistrates.

One evening, soon after sunset, the boy came to me in tears. He told me his story straight, with no attempt at extenuating detail. He had gone pig hunting with some men that afternoon, taking the dog with him—Siddha was away at Yettinahatti for the day. And being inexperienced, he had slipped his dog before the pig had broken cover and the big boar had got away, and the dog had been, badly cut up. He did not know how to treat the wound—Siddha would, but he would be back only the next morning. If only I could keep it alive till then. . .

There was no vet there, and people sometimes brought their dogs to me. I shut in my own dogs, and asked the boy to bring me the casualty, and before he could bring it, cradled in his arms, I made a bed for it, spreading some straw on the floor of the verandah and covering it with a clean gunny sack.

One look at the dog told me that it had no chance. There was a great, gaping slash along its left side, where the boar's tusk had cut clean through the ribcage as through butter; clotted blood covered the entire body, and thick, frothy blood oozed out of the gasping mouth and blocked the nostrils. Laying it gently on its bed, I went in and fetched a pillow and raised its head, and almost at once its breathing grew less rasping, and then it gasped no longer as the blood blocks slid down. The dog was watching me closely as I tended it, and its tail wagged, the first pathetic sign of friendliness it had shown me.

Perhaps the kindest thing was to kill it swiftly, but the boy would not hear of it. I sent him away and asked my cook to make some strong mutton broth, pulled up my easy-chair close to the dog and cleaned the wounds as gently as I could, and gave the suffering animal a slow drink of water, in spoonfuls. Then I remembered a powerful analgesic that I had with me, and pushed the pill down its throat with a finger.

He was quiet now, and I thought perhaps the pill had begun to act and he was sleeping, but his eyes were open and on me. I felt a weight on my bare feet, and looking down saw that he had shifted his head on to them—when I tried to move it back to the pillow, he whimpered, and so I let him rest it on my feet. Something in the contact with a living being comforted him, perhaps. He was so quiet, so much at peace, in spite of his ghastly wounds.

I fed him the broth when it came, in dribblets; perhaps it would do him good, and anyway he needed fluids, having lost so much blood. At 11 p.m. the electric lights went out as usual, and I got up to light the hurricane lamp, and immediately he began to moan and whine and tried to get up, and I had to hurry back to him and pillow his head on my feet once more.

By midnight the pricking in my feet was unbearable, a thousand fine needles were piercing them, but no other pillow brought him comfort. I spoke softly to him, and he wagged his tail and was relaxed. He was finding it difficult to breathe now, the cut-up lung was giving him trouble, but he was quiet enough.

At dawn he died, peacefully, with his head still on my feet, and I could not help feeling a great gladness that his suffering was at an end at last. And that night I realised a thing about life and death, and looking back upon it all after all these years of seeing and experiencing sorrow and joy, pain and delight, I feel the truth of it still—how much more truly and swiftly the tone establishes communication than the right word or niceties of expression, how much more real understanding is at the level of mere emotional kinship than at the lofty heights of barren intellect.

The Happy Man

In the heart of the Deccan is a great, circular fort that Tippu Sultan built, so big that a whole village lies within it now. The villagers are mostly Muslims, many of them descendants of Tipu's troopers, no doubt. They live by agriculture and sheep-farming and keep themselves to themselves, an insularity that is easy because of the forbidding stone walls.

Not that they are too proud or standoffish—the men wear turbans like the Hindus of surrounding villages and the women gossip and sell produce at neighbouring bazaars, but they are content with what they have and are deeply attached to their modest homes.

No wonder, then, that we found the Happy Man here, in this village. We met him accidentally, when a sudden and sustained downpour forced us to seek shelter in his house. Fakhruddin lived in a little mud-and-thatch dwelling with a gourd climbing over the thatch, a home as unpretentious as any within the fort, but it was the nearest and his *pial* was high and dry. He was lean and dark and middle-aged, with rough hands that told of manual labour, and there was a certain quiet dignity in the way he held his beedi, as if it were a hookah, and in the aquiline cast of his features.

Seated in comfort on his *pial*, we made ourselves known to our host. The Sub-Magistrate was the first to announce himself—he informed Fakhruddin that he was the Magistrate of those parts.

'No doubt,' replied our host, a man of few words. Nor had he any doubt that the Forest Officer was, in fact, the Forest Officer or the tehsildar. He knew none of us and had not heard of us, but with an old-world courtesy he was willing to take us at our word. And it was obvious that he was not impressed with the weight of official prestige squatting upon his *pial*. He told us that he worked in his betel garden all day and rested in his home at night, and that he knew no one outside his restricted beat.

The Sub-Magistrate, even more than the Tehsildar, resented this indifference to his jurisdiction. He asked Fakhruddin, a trifle sarcastically I thought, if he knew there was a District Judge.

'Could be,' came the reply. Fakhruddin also conceded, when questioned, the probable existence of the Police Inspector and the Collector, but he knew none of them. Why should he, he asked, with no hint of irony in his voice, when he led such a law-abiding life?

District officers failing to touch any chord in his memory, we tried him with lesser, local representatives of Government, but he did not know them either. The Forest Officer argued that he surely knew the Ranger, since he needed bamboos for his betel garden and must apply to the Ranger for a licence to cut bamboo in the jungle—but Fakhruddin cut no bamboos himself; he bought them from a man in the village who had a licence.

At last he admitted that he did, in point of fact, know a Government Officer—he knew Komarappa. Komarappa was such a common name there that we had no inkling who he meant. But all he could tell was that Komarappa was a very big man, not big physically but in status, and no doubt graced some important office. Finally, after

close inquiry, we established Komarappa's identity beyond question. He was the peon attached to the Sub-Magistrate's Court, who deputed occasionally as Process Server as well, and Fakhruddin knew him because, once a year, Komarappa collected a betel-garden tax from him.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and we had no further excuse for crowding Fakhruddin's *pial*. As we resumed our interrupted journey in the hoodless jeep, the Sub-Magistrate was loud in his condemnation of our late host. Apparently he was cut to the quick that anyone should respect his peon's status but not his. A mile further on it suddenly occurred to me that a Court Peon and part-time Process Server had no call to collect taxes from anyone, even if there was such a thing as a betel-garden tax. But I kept the thought to myself, for I was now thoroughly infected with Fakhruddin's philosophy. After all, it could be.